

RITUALS OF ETHNICITY:  
MIGRATION, MIXTURE, AND THE MAKING OF THANGMI IDENTITY  
ACROSS HIMALAYAN BORDERS

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# RITUALS OF ETHNICITY: MIGRATION, MIXTURE, AND THE MAKING OF THANGMI IDENTITY ACROSS HIMALAYAN BORDERS

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This ethnography examines the relationships between political discourse, ritual practice, cultural performance, and circular migration in producing ethnic identity for the Thangmi, a Himalayan community dispersed across border areas of Nepal, India, and the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China. With a population of approximately 40,000, the Thangmi speak a distinct Tibeto–Burman language, and maintain a religious system which draws upon aspects of shamanic, Hindu and Buddhist practice in a synthetic manner. This dissertation shows how Thangmi subjectivities are forged in a transnational dialectic between discursive statements of cultural absence and ritualized expressions of cultural presence, prompting a reconceptualization of how both ethnicity and ritual work within contexts of mobility.

The Thangmi have been almost entirely absent from lay, political, and academic discourses on ethnicity in all three of the national contexts in which they live. There are no previous substantive ethnographic publications on the group. Yet many Thangmi view ethnography as a valuable asset within the politics of recognition, so

beyond its theoretical imperatives, this dissertation is intended as a documentary resource for the community. As such, it demonstrates the continued value—and complicity—of ethnography in serving both academic and political agendas.

This dissertation explores the history of Thangmi migration from Nepal to India and the TAR, and illustrates how contemporary cross-border movements bring members of the Thangmi community into contact with three different national policies for recognizing minorities and legislating difference. The dissertation describes Thangmi participation in the broader *jana-jati*, or “indigenous nationalities”, movement in Nepal, as well as their campaign for government recognition as a “Scheduled Tribe” within India’s reservations system.

This work is based primarily on ethnographic research conducted in Nepal’s Dolakha, Sindhupalchok and Kathmandu districts; the Indian states of West Bengal (Darjeeling District) and Sikkim; and China’s Tibetan Autonomous Region (Nyalam County). It also draws upon textual and multi-media sources. The resulting analytical approach bridges depictions of ethnicity as a political construction dependent largely on discourse, and those of identity as a subjective production dependent largely on practice, to offer an empirically rich study of contemporary ethnic identity as lived in a cross-border environment.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sara Beth Shneiderman was born in Bloomington, Indiana, in 1975. After moving to Washington, DC as a child, she completed her BA with honors at Brown University in 1997, with a dual major in Anthropology and Religious Studies. She first visited Nepal in 1994 as an undergraduate, and returned to live there full-time between 1997–2000, during which time she coordinated experiential education programs and held a Fulbright Fellowship. After a year spent between Cambridge and Amsterdam establishing the Digital Himalaya project, she began her graduate studies at Cornell in 2001. Funded by the National Science Foundation and the Social Science Research Council, her dissertation research took her back to Nepal, as well as to India and the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China between 2004–2006. She is currently a Research Fellow in Anthropology at St Catharine's College, University of Cambridge, UK, where she lives with her husband Mark and son Samuel.

*Bubu pairi, tete jarphu, hu wari, humi damari, ca camaica!*

*Sakale kai seva!*

With this Thangmi greeting that recognizes all present at a gathering with specific kinship terms, I dedicate this dissertation in particular to those members of the Thangmi community who contributed to this project, but did not live to see its end: Rana Bahadur and Maili of Balasode, Ram Bahadur of Kodari, Maili of Pashelung, Dalaman of Alampu, Basant and Gopal Singh Thami of Darjeeling, and Singha Bahadur Thami of Kathmandu.

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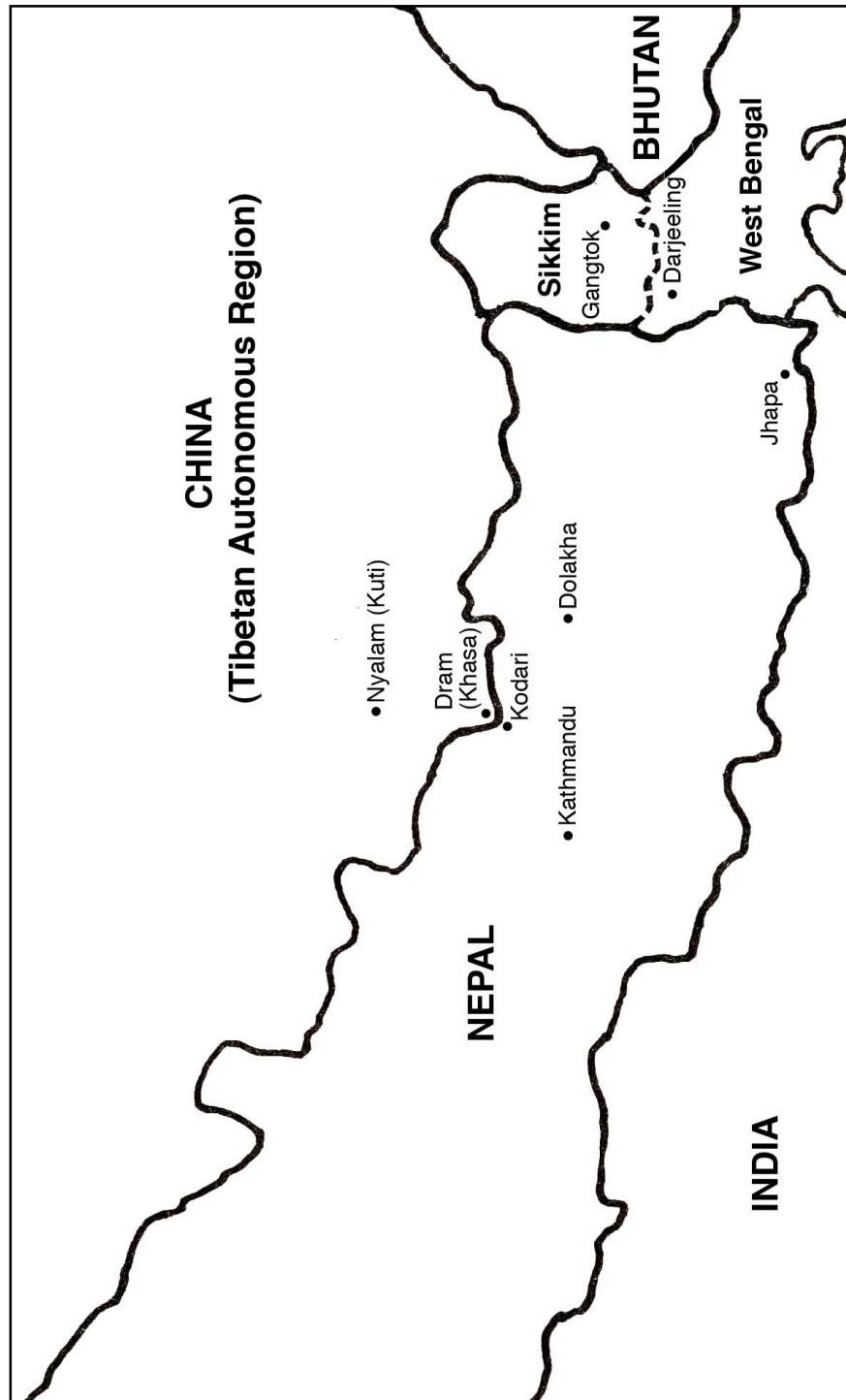


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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIGL	All India Gorkha League
BLTS	Bhai Larke Thami Samaj
BTWA	Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association
CPN	Communist Party of Nepal
CPN-ML	Communist Party of Nepal-Marxist Leninist
CPN-UML	Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist
CRI	Cultural Research Institute
DFiD	Department for International Development (UK)
DGHC	Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council
GDNS	Gorkha Duhkha Nivarak Sammelan
HPSU	Hill People's Social Union
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPO	Indigenous People's Organization
JANSEEP	Janajati Social and Economic Empowerment Project
JEP	Janajati Empowerment Project
LGES	Lapilang Gau Ekai Samiti
NC	Nepali Congress
NEFEN	Nepal Federation of Nationalities (before 2004)
NEFIN	Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (after 2004)
NFDIN	National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities

NPTS	Niko Pragatisil Thami Samaj
NTS	Nepal Thami Samaj
NTSS	Niko Thami Seva Samiti
OBC	Other Backwards Classes
SC	Scheduled Caste
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TAR	Tibetan Autonomous Region
TBTSUK	Thami Bhasa Tatha Sanskriti Utthan Kendra
TEP	Thami Empowerment Project
VDC	Village Development Committee
WGIP	Working Group on Indigenous Peoples
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization



Map of the research area<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Prepared in consultation with the maps department at Olin Library, based on multiple maps of the region held by Cornell University.

## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is an ethnography of the Thangmi, also known as Thami.<sup>2</sup> They are a Himalayan ethnic group of approximately 40,000, who speak a Tibeto–Burman language, and whose religion draws upon aspects of shamanic, Hindu and Buddhist practice in a synthetic manner. The Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts of central–eastern Nepal are home to the largest concentration of Thangmi,<sup>3</sup> but there is also a substantial population in the Darjeeling district of India’s West Bengal state, as well as in the neighboring Indian state of Sikkim.<sup>4</sup> Cross–border circular migration between these locations, as well as to the Nyalam region of China’s Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), which immediately borders Nepal, is a salient feature of Thangmi economic, social and cultural life.

Such normative statements about the Thangmi are always incomplete. Even the superficially straightforward description I have just provided entails a range of difficult representational choices. Traces of those choices will still be evident to some readers, even in the carefully–considered wording in the paragraph above, through

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<sup>2</sup> The ethnonym that members of the group use to refer to themselves in their own language is “Thangmi”, but official documents in both Nepal and India refer to them as “Thami”. I therefore use the term “Thangmi”, except when citing direct quotations or referring to associations and publications that use “Thami”.

<sup>3</sup> According to the 2001 population census, there are 22,999 Thangmi in Nepal (HMG/N 2001). I believe this number to be a substantial underestimate for the reasons described in Shneiderman and Turin (2006: 128–130) and Turin (2000).

<sup>4</sup> A survey conducted by Darjeeling municipality in 2004 enumerated 4,500 Thangmi in the urban area of its jurisdiction alone, while by 2005, an ongoing Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association survey had documented close to 8,000 Thangmi across the states of West Bengal and Sikkim. Verifying these numbers is difficult, given the large number of Thangmi who move back and forth between Nepal and India as circular migrants.

which I have sought to include as many Thangmi as possible by opting for a description in which they might recognize parts of themselves. To say anything further at this juncture about who, in fact, the Thangmi are, think themselves to be, or have been thought to be by others—at individual and collective levels, in religious, cultural, social, historical, political or economic terms—would be to undermine the ensuing content of this ethnography. The eight chapters that follow explore these questions in detail, and taken as a whole, the answer is more than the sum of its parts.

### *Framing Arguments*

The first underlying argument of this thesis is that ethnography, in the classically empirical, holistic sense, still has an important role to play in contributing to projects of recognition, regardless of how transnational, globalized, hybrid, or multi-sited such projects and their agents may be. This position is one of four interlocking arguments that shape the entire text, although the ethnographic material presented in each chapter speaks to a different balance of concerns. The other arguments are as follows.

Taking as a starting point Edmund Leach's supposition that "the maintenance and insistence upon cultural difference can itself become a ritual action expressive of social relations" (1964: 17), the second argument is that ethnicity emerges in a process of ritualization, the sacred object of which is identity itself. Multiple forms of action, which

unfold in as many frames, produce feelings of belonging for those who engage in them, including shamanic practice, cultural performance, political meetings, life cycle events, the work of everyday subsistence, and migratory movement. Such actions articulate the self-conscious agency of individuals to produce their own identities in a manner conditioned by, but not limited to, the power relations inherent in the multiple frames within which they operate.

The third argument is that the nation-states in which people live are paramount among these frames, but not in a singular or exclusive manner. Rather than acting as identity-determining structures, I suggest that individual nation-states act as flexible identity-framing devices, especially for those who cross national borders on a regular basis. Transnational populations may come to value the prospects for belonging available within each frame—in terms of national ethos surrounding the conceptualization of hierarchy and difference, and the associated state policies regarding recognition and benefits—and may view circular migration as a mechanism for maintaining access to these social, cultural and political experiences, as well as to the economic profits which are more commonly highlighted in analyses of migration. Ethnicities that emerge in such contexts are simultaneously shaped by the imperatives of recognition in individual nation-states, and dependent on cross-border movement between multiple countries for their continued existence. This argument articulates a middle way between depictions of ethnicity as determined entirely within the

structures of individual modern nation-states, and narratives of globalization and deterritorialization which imply that locality and national borders are no longer primary factors in shaping ethnic identities. The argument also dispels the notion that ethnicity is experienced homogeneously by each individual participating in its production, refocusing instead on the heterogeneity of experience, both among the collective, and within individual subjectivities, as constitutive of the whole.

The fourth and final argument is that even in an era in which discourses of indigeneity, authenticity and religious purity strongly shape processes of identification, the trope of synthesis can provide a powerful mode for articulating and enacting identities that do not fit squarely within received categories. Such synthesis may be conceptualized in terms of religious syncretism, racial hybridity, cultural mixture, or even dual citizenship. The action of effecting synthesis in an agentive manner in any one of these domains, or across them, can itself be productive of identity. Engaging in synthetic action produces a certain kind of subjectivity—synthetic subjectivity—which, through self-recognition, transforms an awareness of that synthesis in process into a feature of identity itself.

#### *Common Distinctions, Distinctive Commonalities*

Although these arguments emerge out of my ethnographic fieldwork with the Thangmi community, they are by no means exclusive to the



Thangmi. Finding a balance between distinctiveness and commonality is an important concern for Thangmi individuals in their self-representations, just as it is for me in my ethnographic representation of them. On the one hand, producing an identity recognizable as such both to one's self and others requires the demonstration of difference, through linguistic, cultural, religious or other social practices. On the other hand, such differences must be articulated in commonly understood idioms in order to have the desired effect. As described in Chapter 3, non-Thangmi individuals who seek to understand what makes the group distinctive often ask, "Which other ethnic groups are you like?" In order to be meaningful, the answer to this question must first allude to the characteristics of other better-known groups and then make a claim for distinctiveness in relation to them. The value of distinctiveness is lost unless it is relationally situated within a shared set of reference points.

By the same token, when I describe the importance of a particular action or discourse in constituting Thangmi lives, I do so not in order to assert Thangmi exceptionalism, but rather in the spirit of using this fine-grained ethnography of a particular group to raise larger questions about how ethnicity and identity are produced, ritual and politics enacted, cross-border migration lived, and consciousness experienced for people who may have something in common with those who recognize themselves as Thangmi. At the most intimate level, this category of commonality includes those who identify as

members of other *janajati* (ethnic nationality) groups in Nepal, as Indians of Nepali heritage, and as border people vis-à-vis the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China. At the next level of abstraction, the category also includes those who define themselves, or are defined by others, as indigenous, tribal, marginal, or “out-of-the-way” (Tsing 1993), anywhere in the world. At the most general level, the category can be expanded to include all those whose lives entail cross-border, transnational, diasporic, or migratory movements, and hybrid or syncretic practices. In short, although at analytically relevant moments I make explicit how Thangmi actions, beliefs, and experiences are similar to, and different from, those of others, for the most part these relational positionings are left implicit, and the empirical material I present should be read as evidence of both distinction and commonality. While I tell the Thangmi story for its own sake, this narrative comes to articulate with many others through the telling.

### *Times and Places*

I began research with the Thangmi in September 1999, when I received a Fulbright Fellowship in Nepal to do what I imagined to be “basic ethnographic research” in the Thangmi villages of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts. At that point I had already spent several years in Nepal and spoke passable Nepali, having traveled to the country first as an undergraduate student in 1994 and 1995, and then as the coordinator for an American educational program from 1997 through

the first half of 1999. While thus employed, I made my first visits to Thangmi villages in early 1998 in the company of Mark Turin (now my husband), who was conducting research on the Thangmi language towards a PhD in descriptive linguistics from Leiden University in the Netherlands. Hoping to find something to read about this group of people whom I was encountering for the first time, I scoured the bookstores of Kathmandu for an ethnography of the Thangmi, but could find nothing. The initial impetus for my Fulbright project, and eventually this PhD, emerged out of that absence, the historical reasons for which are described in Chapter 1.

Knowing that different dialects of the Thangmi language were spoken on either side of the Kalinchok ridge which defined the district boundary between Sindhupalchok to the west and Dolakha to the east, I chose as the focal points of my study one Village Development Committee (VDC) in each district: Chokati-Latu in Sindhupalchok and Suspa-Kshamawati in Dolakha. I spent the better part of the 1999–2000 academic year living between these two field sites, and made extended trips to other Thangmi villages such as Piskar, Alampu, Lapilang and Dumkot in the course of the year. The more time I spent in these villages, however, the more I realized that there were other places that I needed to visit. Interviews with Thangmi individuals on a range of topics often turned towards experiences of living in India, particularly in Darjeeling (and occasionally Sikkim, Assam, and even as far as Bhutan), or references were made to family members who were

currently there. Stories about travel to Tibet also cropped up, especially from older community members who had traveled there before the border was closed in the wake of China's occupation of Tibet in the 1950s. One colleague pointed me towards a Nepali language short story that described a Thangmi woman working in Darjeeling bazaar (Adhikari 1997),<sup>5</sup> while another colleague suggested that there might be a Thangmi population in China's TAR.<sup>6</sup>

It was becoming increasingly clear to me that the Thangmi were anything but sedentary inhabitants of bounded villages, and that in order to understand the Thangmi whom I had come to know in Nepal, I would need to travel to India, and I hoped the TAR as well. I visited Darjeeling for the first time in 2000 towards the end of my Fulbright scholarship, and the conversations that I had there with settled Thangmi who held Indian citizenship, as well as circular migrants from Nepal, convinced me that understanding the complex cross-border relationships between people in both locations would be key to understanding what Thangminess meant to all of them. It would take some years before I could visit the TAR to learn how this third location fit—and in some ways, did not fit, as I shall describe below—into the overall picture.

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Rhoderick Chalmers.

<sup>6</sup> Sueyoshi Toba, a Japanese linguist, had conducted brief research on the Thangmi language (Toba 1990). In 1999, he showed me photocopies of the then-current *Ethnologue* publication, which stated that the Thangmi language was spoken in Tibetan areas of China in addition to Nepal. The current version of this catalogue is online at <[http://www.ethnologue.com/show\\_language.asp?code=thf](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=thf)>, last accessed November 30, 2008.

After completing three years of coursework at Cornell from 2001–2004, I returned to Asia for fieldwork in October 2004, with a proposal to conduct multi-sited research in all three locations. For the best part of four years, Kathmandu was the base from which I visited many different locations. From 2004 to 2006, I spent three months in Darjeeling and Sikkim each year (totaling nine months). After submitting a request for three months of research permission in the TAR, I was granted a five-week research permit in April 2005, two weeks of which was spent processing paperwork in Lhasa, leaving me exactly three weeks to conduct research in Nyalam county, along the border with Nepal. In between these trips to India and the TAR, for several weeks at a time I returned to each of the Thangmi villages in Nepal that I had first visited in 1999. I also spent time in Kathmandu getting to know Thangmi ethnic activists based in the city, as well as other political activists and members of so-called “civil society” (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of this term) active during this particularly tumultuous period of Nepal’s modern history. I began writing this dissertation in early 2007 while still living in Kathmandu, and was therefore able to revisit my field sites in Dolakha and Sindhupalchok throughout the writing process. Although I have not returned to India since completing my last long period of fieldwork there in December 2006, I had several opportunities to bring my knowledge of events in Darjeeling up to date by talking at length with Thangmi from India who visited Kathmandu in 2007 and 2008.

The ethnographic present of this dissertation thus spans a decade, from 1998 to 2008. Much of my initial research in the Thangmi areas of Nepal was conducted in the earliest phase of my fieldwork, predating my formal enrolment as a graduate student. To the extent possible, I rechecked all of the information that I had gathered in these early years during later phases of fieldwork, after I had refined my ethnographic and theoretical focus. In this dissertation, I include various materials collected in multiple locations throughout this decade of research: descriptions of practices, performances and conversations; transcriptions of ritual chants and stories; direct quotations from interviews and speeches; translations of publications; and excerpts from official documents and correspondence. Whenever the specific timeframe and location in which an event occurred or a document was collected is relevant, I have done my best to include this information.

### *Bracketing Out the TAR*

One important sub-set of the ethnographic data that I collected is not fully discussed in this dissertation: the material that resulted from my time in the TAR in 2005. There are two reasons for this omission. The first is that due to the very short time that I was ultimately able to spend in the TAR, I could not conduct in-depth work comparable to that which I conducted in India and Nepal. This resulted in a “thinness” to the TAR data, which made my early attempts to interweave it with

the “thicker” material from Nepal and India awkward, both in terms of narrative style and analytic consistency. Second, my most important discovery in the TAR was that people who might have once identified as Thangmi there now hid those histories in order to assimilate to a Sherpa identity, apparently because this category was more easily recognizable to the Chinese state. For this reason, in the TAR I found no individuals engaged in projects of recognition as Thangmi, or invested in producing or reproducing a “Thangmi identity” per se, with the result that many of the questions around which this dissertation is structured were moot.

I concluded that I could not do the TAR side of the story justice without addressing an entirely different set of questions that moved away from my focus on Thangmi identity, and opened up an investigation of the geopolitics of ethnicity in the China–Tibet–Nepal borderlands in a broader, relational sense. While this is a worthwhile project which I am continuing to pursue, it does not feature fully in this dissertation. Presenting the material from the TAR requires a different analytical frame, as well as additional context from a broad set of secondary sources, and a detailed review of the production of Sherpa, Tibetan, and Chinese ethnic and national identities over time.<sup>7</sup> For all of these reasons, although the mythical role of Tibet as the attributed source of some aspects of Thangmi identity and practice is discussed in Chapters 3 and 7, and the historical and contemporary

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<sup>7</sup> Some initial forays in this direction appear in Shneiderman (2006).

role of Tibet as a short-term trading and migration destination for Thangmi from Nepal is addressed in Chapter 4, a more nuanced analysis of border ethnicities and identities in Nyalam County will have to be addressed in the future. Until that time, I direct interested readers to a short piece in *Himal South Asian* in which I outlined some of the dynamics at play in the TAR (Shneiderman 2005a). Nonetheless, the experience of conducting ethnographic work in the TAR provided an important third frame of reference, setting into relief some of the situations I had encountered in Nepal and India as specific to those locations, and the insights thus gained are incorporated into the present work.

#### *Thangmi “in” Nepal and India: Terminological Choices*

The people represented in this dissertation are, then, largely those whom I describe as “Thangmi in Nepal” and “Thangmi in India”. This somewhat awkward terminology requires clarification, as otherwise it may appear that these phrases defeat my own objective of defining Thangmi identity as a quintessentially transnational one, which is never “in” only one place.

Brian Axel pinpoints the potential problem with such terminology on the first page of his ethnography of the Sikh diaspora: “One would be hard put to say that, preferring the local to the global, there are no diasporas, rather Chinese *in* New York or, for example, Sikhs *in* London” (2001: 1). He opts instead for the doubled “Sikh



diaspora *as a diaspora*" (Axel 2001: 8) to reiterate that it is the diaspora itself that is his object of study, not "exemplary" members of it in any particular location (Axel 2001: 1). While I explain in more detail in Chapter 6 why the Thangmi case complicates Axel's definition of diaspora, my point here is that taking a diaspora, or any other type of multi-sited community, as the object of one's study does not obviate the need to evaluate carefully how various members of it orient themselves within specific nation-state frameworks at specific historical junctures.

Since one of the key arguments of this dissertation is that nation-states serve as important frames for human action, which individuals consciously recognize as such, it is essential to deploy a set of terms to indicate the specific actions effected within each nation-state frame. However, the chosen terms must also recognize that action carried out within each frame often implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, references actions carried out within other frames. Here, "Thangmi in Nepal" and "Thangmi in India" serve as the shorthand for this set of concepts. In other words, when I write "Thangmi in Nepal", I mean, "Thangmi acting in relation to the nation-state of Nepal as a primary frame, although they may have spent time in India, or at other times have acted in relation to the nation-state of India as a primary frame, and/or may be aware of the relationship between the two frames as a factor in shaping their actions, even if they have not actually visited the other country". "Thangmi in India" means the

converse. By “Thangmi in Nepal” or “Thangmi in India”, I do not intend to imply, for instance, “Thangmi who have never left Nepal” or “Thangmi who have a certain essential quality because they were born in, or live in, India”. The word “in”, then, locates a set of actions within the ideological framework of a nation, not a body within a bounded physical territory. Sometimes, I also use the terms “Thangmi from Nepal” when referring to “Thangmi acting in relation to the nation–state of Nepal as a primary frame, but who are physically present in India at the point of action”, and “Thangmi from India” when I mean the opposite.

Why do I not simply use the more obvious terms “Nepalese Thangmi” or “Nepali Thangmi”, and “Indian Thangmi”? Each of these terms carries its own baggage, and has the effect of offending some subset of the people ostensibly described by it, often for political or legal reasons which must be taken seriously. These points have been argued at some length, so I cannot cite every position, but here I offer a general overview of the most relevant issues for this dissertation, and offer a few key examples of how these terms have been used in recent academic literature.

“Nepalese” was once the commonly agreed upon English term for citizens of the nation–state of Nepal, as well as for the country’s lingua franca. However, in recent decades, this term has generally fallen into disuse, viewed by Nepali–speaking intellectuals as a colonial invention that does not match the ethnonym that people use to talk

about themselves and their language, which is instead “Nepali”.<sup>8</sup> Other intellectuals, however, seek to recuperate “Nepalese” as the term of choice to refer to citizens of Nepal, arguing that “Nepali” only fully includes mother-tongue speakers of the Nepali language, while excluding native speakers of the many other languages spoken within Nepal’s borders. For the most part, recent academic work in English tends to follow the convention of using the term “Nepali”, as established by Nepal-based writers.<sup>9</sup>

“Nepali”, however, is a more ambiguous term, since it can be used to refer to the language, as well as to a broad cultural complex, neither of which carries any inherent indication of citizenship. This usage is most widespread in the Nepali-speaking areas of India, including Darjeeling and Sikkim, where people identify themselves as linguistically or ethnically Nepali, yet are Indian citizens who feel frustrated by assumptions that the term “Nepali” refers only to people who are citizens of Nepal. In its most extreme form, this frustration manifested in the attempt to do away with the term “Nepali” altogether

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Hutt argues that both “Nepali” and “Nepalese”, as well as “Gorkha” and “Gorkhali”, were coined by the British (1997: 113), and that there was no equivalent indigenous term that was not caste or ethnic group-specific to denote nationals of Nepal before these colonial terms were appropriated (1997: 116).

<sup>9</sup> David Gellner’s 2003 edited volume, *Resistance and the State: Nepalese Experiences*, is a notable exception. Gellner argues that there is nothing more offensive about “Nepalese” than there is about “Japanese”, for instance, when used in English (personal communication), and that “Nepalese” is felt by many to be more inclusive for the reasons described above.

in favor of “Gorkhali” during the agitation for a separate Nepali-speaking state of “Gorkhaland” within India in the 1980s.<sup>10</sup>

Many individuals with whom I worked in Darjeeling used the two terms “Nepali” and “Gorkhali” interchangeably, while some insisted on the exclusive use of “Gorkhali”, and yet others dismissed “Gorkhali” as associated with a political agenda which they did not support, and opted simply for “Nepali”.<sup>11</sup> For those who used the term “Nepali” to describe themselves, the implication was not “citizens of Nepal”, but rather “citizens of India who are members of an ethnic group defined by its shared Nepali language and cultural practices”.<sup>12</sup> To describe this large category of people—including many Thangmi in India but also extending beyond them to include members of many other groups—I have opted for the term, “Indian citizens of Nepali heritage”.<sup>13</sup> Early on in my research, I made the mistake of using the term “Nepali origin”

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<sup>10</sup> See Chalmers (2003, Chapter 5) for a thorough historical discussion of these terms.

<sup>11</sup> In Sikkim, these dynamics are different once again, with many people using the term “Sikkimese Nepali” rather than “Gorkhali” to describe themselves. Although “Sikkimese Nepalis” share the historical experience of migration and the contemporary experience of participation in the Nepali-language public sphere, they generally seek to disassociate themselves from the political agenda of Gorkhaland that the term “Gorkhali” alludes to, since as “subjects” (the official term used) of the state of Sikkim they enjoyed a different set of privileges from their Darjeeling counterparts in the state of West Bengal. This is just one example of how historical differences and their ensuing effects on the policy of not only nation-states, but federal states, districts and even smaller administrative units, can create frames of their own within the over-arching frame of a nation-state.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Hutt addresses this connotation with the title and content of his article “Being Nepali Without Nepal”, which describes what he terms the “Nepali diaspora in India” (1997).

<sup>13</sup> The hyphenated term “Nepali-Indian” (in the multi-cultural sense of African-American or Anglo-Irish), or the unhyphenated “Indian Nepali”, along with “Nepalese-Indian” and “Indian Nepalese”, are also used in various publications to various effects. None of these are used consistently enough to be appropriated here.

instead, which angered many of my interlocutors, since by invoking a putative “place of origin” in another nation–state, it seemed to dislocate people from the Indian nation in which they proudly claimed citizenship. The phrase “Nepali heritage”, on the other hand, was acceptable, and even desirable, since it used the term “Nepali” to denote a cultural and linguistic heritage, rather than political belonging in a specific nation–state.

During my fieldwork in India, I found that people who preferred to use the term “Nepali” to indicate their cultural heritage were often irked when they heard it applied to circular migrants who appeared to be “from Nepal”. To Indian citizens of Nepali heritage, the usage of “Nepali” to refer to people who are presumed to hold citizenship in Nepal, but come to India for short–term labor, effectively implies that everyone of Nepali heritage is *de facto* a Nepali citizen, and therefore does not have rights to citizenship in India.<sup>14</sup> This complicated logic emerges out of the fact that the terms of the Indo–Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950 preclude the possibility of dual citizenship in the two countries. This legal reality generates constant anxiety among Indians of Nepali heritage in Darjeeling that they may be expelled from India

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<sup>14</sup> Tanka Subba (1992) therefore proposes a definitional rubric by which “Nepalese” should be used to refer to citizens of Nepal, while “Nepali” should be used to refer to the ethnicity within India. A 2005 article by Vimal Khawas in *The Hindu* newspaper advocates the uptake of this scheme in popular discourse, which I have indeed heard used fairly frequently in India  
<<http://www.hindu.com/op/2005/06/19/stories/2005061901081400.htm>>, accessed November 22, 2008. However, this is problematic from the perspective of many individuals who are indeed citizens of Nepal, yet reject the term “Nepalese”, for the reasons described above. I thank Tanka Subba for engaging in an extended discussion of these issues with me.

*en masse*, as individuals thought to have been in a similar category to them indeed were in the 1980s and 1990s from the Indian states of Meghalaya and Mizoram further to the east, as well as from the neighboring country of Bhutan (Hutt 2003).

For all of these reasons, I do not use the term “Nepali” as a noun to refer to people. I do, however, use it in two other ways. First, I use it as an adjective to refer to several broadly conceived complexes of practice that transcend national boundaries: language, literature, society, history, heritage, media, and the public sphere. In a variation on this theme, I use the term “pan-Nepali” to refer to the ethnic identity that people from a broad range of groups of Nepali heritage in India share (in contrast to particularly “Thangmi”, “Tamang”, or “Newar” ethnic identities, for example). Second, for lack of a better option, when necessary I also use “Nepali” to denote objects that are specifically linked to the modern nation-state of Nepal, in which cases its meaning should be clear: for instance, “the Nepali state”, “Nepali citizenship”, “Nepali legislation”, “Nepali state policy”, and “the Nepali national framework”.

The category of “Indian” is equally vexed for different reasons. While people of Nepali heritage who hold Indian citizenship fight for recognition of their Indianness while in India, when they travel to, or live in, Nepal they downplay it as much as possible. In Nepal, only citizens of Nepal may own land, and “Indians” in particular are stereotyped as the imperious big brother next door whom everyone

loves to hate. As described in further detail in Chapter 4, many Indian citizens of Nepali heritage in fact continue to own land in Nepal, and to work in the private sector as teachers, doctors and entrepreneurs. All of these occupations entail the production of Nepali citizenship papers, despite the fact that almost all of these individuals already hold Indian documents.<sup>15</sup> This production of dual citizenship puts these individuals in a large, quasi-illicit category, making them highly attuned to the threat of legal action, even if it rarely becomes a reality. For this reason, although many Thangmi in Nepal are in fact “from India”, just as many in India are “from Nepal”, the former group prefer not to be set apart from other Thangmi in Nepal as “Indian”. For the people with whom I worked, “Indian” did not have the same connotations of a particular ethnic, cultural or linguistic heritage in the manner that “Nepali” did, so I use the term “Indian” only in a manner equivalent to the second usage of “Nepali” above: to refer to the “Indian state”, “Indian citizenship”, “Indian legal framework”, and so forth.

These issues, which have great implications for how Thangmi identity is conceptualized and produced, are discussed in detail in Chapter 6. In short, using the terms “Thangmi in Nepal” and “Thangmi in India” (which I hereafter remove from quotation marks), and

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<sup>15</sup> While migrants from Nepal to India are largely unskilled laborers, migrants from India (of Nepali heritage) to Nepal are generally skilled white collar workers. The latter phenomenon extends far beyond the Thangmi, with many of Kathmandu’s most desirable schools and other institutions staffed by individuals of all ethnic groups who hail from Darjeeling, Sikkim, Assam and other Nepali-speaking regions of India. The political, historical and economic processes that have produced these cross-border flows are worthy of further research, as are the anxieties that the Nepali and Indian state policies on borders and citizenship create.

variations on those themes, helps to avoid reifying any particular set of assumptions about what an individual's citizenship status may be, or how they may relate to the broadly conceived notion of "Nepaliness". Despite my best efforts, I may not have used the rubric that I outline here consistently, for which apologies.

### *Locality*

Although the Nepali and Indian states are key frameworks in relation to which Thangmi identity is articulated, neither Thangmi in Nepal nor Thangmi in India are homogenous groups. During early phases of analysis, I was tempted to map all vectors of difference within the Thangmi community onto these national categories, but later I came to see that other cross-cutting factors were also at play. Some of the most important factors are economic status and education (addressed in Chapter 3), age (described in Chapters 3 and 8), gender (which except for a brief discussion in Chapter 7 is not addressed fully in this dissertation), and locality. In Chapter 4, I argue explicitly for an attention to "translocality", which I suggest can capture some of these differences across location. For the moment, I want to explain briefly where some of the most important localities are.

In Nepal, the majority of Thangmi live in rural hill villages in Dolakha and Sindhupalchok (with a much smaller, but still notable, number in Ramechhap district). I use the phrases "Thangmi village(s)" and "Thangmi area(s)", to refer to geographically specific locations



within these districts where there are substantial concentrations of people who identify as Thangmi, who themselves refer to their places of residence as “Thangmi villages” (although members of other ethnic groups usually also live in, or near, these settlements). Some of the largest and most important Thangmi villages are Alampu, Chokati, Dhuskun, Dumkot, Lapilang, Piskar, Surkhe, and Suspa. A very small number of Thangmi live in urban Kathmandu (Nepal’s only truly metropolitan city), along with a similar number in semi-urban towns in the Tarai districts of Jhapa and Udayapur.<sup>16</sup> Both of these two groups are comprised almost entirely of individuals who settled in these towns recently, having grown up either in rural villages in Nepal, or in Darjeeling. I often refer to such groups as “Kathmandu-based Thangmi” and “Jhapa-based Thangmi”, since their locations—and the positionalities associated with them—set them apart from the majority of Thangmi in Nepal, who live in rural hill districts. Each district, village and hamlet has its own particularities as well, which with the exception of the dialect difference between Sindhupalchok and Dolakha, are impossible to describe schematically. Since these localized differences are important within the cultural politics of Thangminess, I pay careful attention to locality, whenever possible indicating exactly where an event took place, or where an individual was from. Since, as described above, I spent the bulk of my time in two villages (Suspa and Chokati),

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<sup>16</sup> In a 2004 survey, I found approximately 400 Thangmi to be full-time residents of Kathmandu. However, the majority of these individuals were still officially registered as residents of Dolakha or Sindhupalchok. The 1999 publication *Dolakhareng* estimates that there are approximately 300 Thangmi in Jhapa.

more of my material comes from those locations, although I have included information from as wide a range of sites as possible.

In India, the majority of the Thangmi population live in urban Darjeeling municipality or adjacent quasi-urban settlements such as Alubari, Jawahar Basti, Jorebunglow, Mangalpuri, and Tungsung. There are also small concentrations of Thangmi in rural areas throughout the district (both on tea plantations such as Tumsong, and in villages such as Bijen Bari, Rangbull, and Tin Mile, all of which I visited), as well as in Sikkim. Thangmi residence patterns are rarely ethnically homogeneous in India in the manner that they are in Nepal, so I have not used geographical terms to refer to the places where individual Thangmi live in India. However, to the extent possible, I note the specific location where an event occurred or a person was from.

### *Methodologies and Sources*

The village setting in which I conducted my early work in Nepal lent itself to the traditional ethnographic method of participant-observation, both of daily life and ritual practice. I also conducted many formal and informal interviews. I sought out *gurus* (shamans) and village elders in particular, as well as a range of common people of all ages and backgrounds.<sup>17</sup> I used a mini-disc audio recorder to

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<sup>17</sup> After this first usage, the term guru appears without italics throughout the dissertation for ease of reading.

capture many of these one-on-one encounters, as well as to record ritual chants as they were practiced.

I also used photography, both to document events, and to serve as a springboard for discussion when I later returned photos of these events to the people who had participated in them. Whenever possible, I have included relevant photographs to illustrate the text of this dissertation. (All photos are my own unless otherwise noted.) Later, as I expanded my work to India, I also developed my use of visual materials as an ethnographic tool, and began to use a digital video camera in addition to a mini-disc and a digital still camera. Shooting video of practice and performance events in one location and showing it to people in other locations became a defining methodology of my multi-sited work. I organized small viewings in villages, as well as large public programs in Kathmandu and Darjeeling, in order to show video footage and elicit comments. Several of these events are described in the text of this dissertation. These programs often became forums for broad-ranging discussions about Thangmi identity itself, among diverse groups of Thangmi who might not otherwise have met. My own role in the process of Thangmi identity production, both through such events and other actions, is discussed in detail in Chapters 1 and 8.

I first attended a meeting of the Nepal Thami Samaj (NTS), the ethnic association that represents Thangmi within the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), in Kathmandu in late 1999. NTS

meetings, conferences and events quickly became another key site of my fieldwork, both in Kathmandu and in various Thangmi villages. The same is true for the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association (BTWA), the parallel organization in India. Working closely with officers of both organizations, over time I copied a range of documentary materials from their associational archives, which I discuss throughout this dissertation. The histories of these national organizations, as well as other local Thangmi organizations at various times and places, are discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Later in my fieldwork, I also conducted detailed genealogical work with three extended families in Nepal and three in India. Unraveling the intricacies of kinship helped me gain a better understanding of migration and settlement patterns, as well as marriage practices and family relationships.<sup>18</sup> Finally, I conducted a micro-survey on economic issues, in particular property ownership, migration and family size in one ward of Suspa-Kshamawati VDC, Dolakha District, Nepal, which included 130 Thangmi households.<sup>19</sup> In India, the BTWA was in the process of conducting a comparable survey

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<sup>18</sup> Thangmi kinship structures in the abstract sense have been well-described by Turin (2004b, 2006); in my research I focused instead on marriage and settlement patterns in practice.

<sup>19</sup> Several of the questions in this survey were modeled on those asked by Creighton Peet (1978) in the same area 25 years earlier in order to facilitate comparison of these two data sets over time. During the period of my fieldwork, the Dolakha district branch of the NTS also conducted its own survey of Thangmi populations in Dolakha, as did NEFIN. I have received the data from the former survey, but am still awaiting information on the latter. Eventually, I would like to compare the survey structures of each of these with my own, and consider the social and political implications of such intensive surveying for ethnicity and identity formation.

during the period of my fieldwork, and I accompanied the organization's officers on several of their data collecting trips.

Throughout this dissertation, I draw extensively upon four book-length compilations of writing by Thangmi individuals that have been published by Thangmi organizations. After much consideration, I have decided to cite these publications by their titles, rather than their authors. There are several reasons for this choice. First, since all of the authors share the last name Thangmi or Thami, citation by last name would prove confusing. Second, although each publication lists the editor (or in some cases a long list of editors) of the entire compilation, individual articles are only erratically attributed to individual authors, making it difficult to ascribe authorship for each article. Finally, as is described in Chapter 5, since each publication is geographically, historically and ideologically positioned as a whole, I believe readers will find it most useful to become familiar with the titles of the four key book-length works that are referenced throughout the dissertation. These are *Nan Ni Patuko* (2054 VS),<sup>20</sup> *Dolakhareng* (1999), *Niko Bachinte* (2003) and *Thami Samudayako Aitihasik Chinari ra Sanskar Sanskriti* (2061 [2056] VS).<sup>21</sup> In parenthetical citations, I use the

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<sup>20</sup> When citing years in Nepal's Vikram Sambat calendar, I use the abbreviation VS. The Vikram Sambat calendar is approximately 57 years ahead of the Gregorian calendar. 2054 VS is therefore 1997–1998 AD, while 2061 VS is 2004–2005 AD. Whenever possible I cite publications by the Gregorian year, however, in cases where that date is not provided in the original publication, this is not possible unless one knows the exact month of publication, since the Vikram Sambat year runs from approximately April through March of two Gregorian years.

<sup>21</sup> Although actually published in 2061, the book bears the date 2056 on its front page. The manuscript was allegedly submitted to NFDIN in 2056, but the book was

following one-word abbreviations for these four publications respectively: Patuko, Reng, Niko and Samudaya.

### *Languages, Assistance and Transcription*

For the most part, I conducted research in the Nepali language. Most speakers of the Thangmi language are fully bilingual in Nepali, which is the lingua franca in Darjeeling and Sikkim as well as in Nepal. Ritual practice is conducted largely in Thangmi, in which I gained basic competence over the course of my fieldwork. However, in order to understand the details of Thangmi language content, I worked with Bir Bahadur, a young Thangmi man fluent in both Thangmi and Nepali. He provided on-the-fly translation as events or conversations were unfolding, detailed transcription and translation work of recorded materials, and a wealth of his own knowledge and analytic insight, which is mentioned at relevant points throughout the text. The term “research assistant” in no way describes the depth of Bir Bahadur’s contribution to my work over the course of a decade, yet I feel it is the most accurate way to describe the formal aspect of our relationship in the context of a scholarly manuscript.

Frequently in India, but also occasionally in Nepal, informants chose to speak with me in English, or in a combination of Nepali and English. Even people who did not speak English *per se* often sprinkled

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only actually published in 2061. An unofficial manuscript copy was in circulation before the official publication date.

their conversation with English words. The documents which I collected were also in a combination of Nepali and English.

To the extent possible, I have indicated the language in which statements were made or in which a text was published, using single quotation marks to set off words used in English within an otherwise non-English sentence. Terms from Nepali, Thangmi, Tibetan and Sanskrit are presented in italics, with the following abbreviations: (N) for Nepali, (T) for Thangmi, (T\*) for Thangmi ritual language, (Tib) for Tibetan, and (Skt) for Sanskrit. Nepali and Thangmi terms and conversation are presented in a modified phonetic form without diacritics. Proper place, ethnic, and personal names (i.e. Kathmandu, Newar, Bir Bahadur) are capitalized but not italicized. I hope that specialist readers will forgive this somewhat eclectic approach towards representing the linguistic diversity which I encountered in my research in the effort to make the content of it accessible to a broad interdisciplinary audience.

### *Chapter Outline*

The rationale for the structure of this dissertation is presented in more detail in Chapter 1. Here, I provide the reader with a basic outline. Chapter 1 builds upon George Marcus' notion of "complicity" and Charles Hale's proposal for "activist research" in an exploration of the role of social science within the politics of recognition, by way of a historical review of Thangmi experiences of representation. Drawing

particularly on the work of Erving Goffman, Maurice Godelier, and Richard Handler, Chapter 2 explores the ritualized nature of ethnicity, as produced within multiple nation–state frames through practices and performances which take identity as their sacred object. Through an analysis of Thangmi origin myths and writings, Chapter 3 posits the category of the “original” as a site of contested power between different groups of Thangmi, particularly gurus who locate that power in oral practice, and activists who seek to appropriate that power in written texts. Chapter 4 examines pragmatic aspects of Thangmi cross–border migration, considering the cultural and social dimensions of belonging that make such movements an ongoing lifestyle choice. Chapter 5 traces the history of Thangmi associations in Nepal and India, focusing on how they have been shaped by historically contingent, state–specific paradigms for social progress, while also communicating with each other across borders to create a transnational Thangmi public sphere. Presenting a detailed description of propitiation practices and cultural performances that affirm the power of territorial deities in Thangmi ritual, Chapter 6 explores the divergent ways in which Thangmi conceptualize their attachment to territory. Chapter 7 details the role of clan affiliations in constituting Thangminess through the practice of life cycle rituals, including birth, marriage and death. Through a consideration of the Thangmi role in a Newar–orchestrated Dasain ritual in Dolakha bazaar, Chapter 8



explores questions of agency and power, both Thangmi and my own.  
This dissertation closes with a short epilogue and a bibliography.

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**The Conceit of Ethnography:**  
**Social Science and the Politics of Recognition**

“There is no idea about the origin of the Thami community or the term ‘Thami’. Their history is indeed obscure. Neither the scanty literature that is available on them nor their own traditions speak enough about their history and culture ... The Thamis do not have any exclusive ritual worth mentioning.”

– anthropologist Tanka Subba, writing in the Anthropological Survey of India’s *People of India* series (1993: 184–185)

“The government does not know us yet. We must make them come to know us”.<sup>1</sup>

– Latte Apa, Thangmi guru in Darjeeling, India<sup>2</sup>

“We have a request for all scientists and scholars: please do research about the Thami, please write about us, and we will stand ready to help you.”

– Tahal Bahadur, president of the Thami Youth Congress, writing in the publication *Thami Samudaya* (2061 [2056] VS: vi)

“If the Thangmi forgot to worship Bhume, the deity would not recognize us. If the deity does not recognize us, how can others recognize us?”<sup>3</sup>

– Man Bahadur, resident of Suspa, Dolakha, Nepal

The Thangmi recognize themselves as a distinctive group, yet they have remained almost entirely absent from social science scholarship on the Himalayan region, as well as from political and popular discussions of ethnicity. The four epigraphs presented here provide a range of opinions on why this is the case, and what this absence

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<sup>1</sup> Original Nepali: *Sarkarle hamilai chineko chhaina. Chinaunu parchha.*

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all informants cited in this dissertation share the last name “Thangmi” (when they introduce themselves) or “Thami” (when they write their name on official documents). I therefore refer to individuals by their first names only.

<sup>3</sup> Original Nepali: *Thangmile bhumelai mana birseko bhae deutale hamilai manyata dindaina. Deutale hamilai manyata diena bhane arule kasari manyata garna sakchha?*

means for contemporary Thangmi individuals. Writing in the Anthropological Survey of India's *People of India* series, Tanka Subba (1993) provides one of the few contemporary introductions to the group, but emphasizes the group's "obscurity" and laments that the fact that their "traditions" do not adequately demonstrate "history and culture".<sup>4</sup> The next two quotations above, from a senior Thangmi guru in India and a youth activist in Nepal respectively, represent opinions held by a wide range of Thangmi individuals, who feel that both political and academic attention from non-Thangmi others are essential tools in their project to rectify a history of misrecognition. Within academic discourse, such misrecognition has resulted in descriptions like Subba's which stereotype the Thangmi as "backwards" and lacking in recognizable culture.<sup>5</sup> In concert with other historical factors, such social scientific representations have contributed to the near complete absence of the Thangmi from political discourse in the contemporary nation-states in which they live, at least until very

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<sup>4</sup> Laura Jenkins (2003: Chapter 3) details the highly politicized nature of the *People of India* project in which this assessment appeared, showing how the volumes produced were marshaled to support a range of ideological agendas. She also explains that the writers, "based their findings about each community on an average of five key informants ... and spent an average of 5.5 days researching each community" (Jenkins 2003: 49). Tanka Subba himself told me that he had only three days to complete his profile of the Thangmi, and spent much of that time trying to locate appropriate informants (personal communication). All of this suggests that while Subba's assessment was based on extremely thin data, its political effect—which many Thangmi perceive as a damning relegation to obscurity—was substantial.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Rajesh Gautam and Ashoke Thapa-Magar's *Tribal Ethnography of Nepal*, which was modeled on the *People of India* project, claims that Thangmi, "are unable to lie, cheat or deceive" (1994: 314), that "they are not clean in their habits" (1994: 314) and that "when a Thami is seen it is clear that these people have recently renounced their uncivilized ways and have adapted to modern society" (1994: 323). See also Sapkota (2045 VS) and Rana (2049 VS) for similar treatments in Nepali.

recently. The final quotation above suggests that, for many Thangmi for whom ritual practice remains a key mode of both cultural production and social reproduction, campaigns for academic or political recognition can not be successful unless divine recognition from territorial deities like Bhume is maintained. This form of divine recognition is premised upon appropriate ritual behavior in the presence of the sacred.<sup>6</sup>

With reference to broader debates over the politics of recognition in multicultural societies (Taylor 1992; Povinelli 2002; Appadurai 2004; Graham 2005), this chapter explores the ways in which Thangmi come to know themselves and others as Thangmi within complex fields of action and knowledge shaped by interlocking schemes of ritual, political, and social scientific recognition. Although the desire for political recognition from the state is a relatively new phenomenon for many Thangmi, recognition from other sources outside the realm of Thangmi social relations, particularly from the divine world, has long been a key force in constituting those relations and the identities they produce. I suggest that contemporary Thangmi encounter a range of “recognizing agents”, from territorial deities to the Nepali and Indian states to (I)NGOs and anthropologists to members of different caste and ethnic groups, each of which reaffirm different aspects of identity when they come into conversation with

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<sup>6</sup> Bhume is a non-gendered, animistic earth deity (described in detail in Chapter 6); I therefore refer to the deity as “it”, rather than using “he” or “she”.

Thangmi individuals or collectivities. In particular, I consider how social scientists (in the Thangmi case, me) may engage in a productive form of what George Marcus has called “complicity” (1999) when they become recognizing agents who catalyze community efforts to achieve recognition from other non-Thangmi sources. Ethnography that works to transform the “terms of recognition” (Appadurai 2004) for particular groups can contribute to Appadurai’s call to strengthen anthropology’s engagement with the future, by treating culture not only as evidence of a collectivity’s past, but as a toolkit which members of that group may utilize as they craft their future.

The object of description in this dissertation is the *process* of producing Thangminess as a totality, which simultaneously depends upon and transcends the geographical, political, religious and cultural borders by which it is defined. Each chapter of this dissertation reflects the complexity of this process, with data and analysis from a range of field sites, which when organized thematically, highlights the heterogeneous, yet collectively produced, nature of contemporary Thangminess. By using the conceit of ethnography as an organizing principle, with chapters loosely structured around “traditional” anthropological subjects such as ritual, myth, economy, territory, political organization, clans and the life cycle, and the dynamics of power and agency, I seek to demonstrate that reflexive, multi-sited research with transnational communities does not preclude in-depth description of such fundamental aspects of social life. That the rubric

“Thangmi” describes a diversity of experiences which are not easily reconciled within a standardized, singular identity is a fundamental premise of my work; yet using the form of a monographic ethnography allows me to create the singular social scientific profile that diverse members of the Thangmi community commonly desire, for reasons which will become clear below.

The ensuing text is not precisely what any single individual or interest group within the varied, transnational Thangmi community might like me to write, but rather a “bird’s eye view” (Briggs 1996) that shows how all of the people I have come to recognize as Thangmi are engaged in the disparate range of day-to-day actions that comprise culture in the making.<sup>7</sup> Yet there should be something here for everyone, pieces taken-for-granted and contentious, which as a whole add up to a first Thangmi ethnography that contributes to a range of Thangmi aspirations, as well as my own.

### *What’s in a Name?: The Problem of (Mis)Recognition*

Recent discussions of multiculturalism have identified “the politics of recognition” as a crucial arena in which modern subjects validate their

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<sup>7</sup> Briggs references Foucault’s notion of the panopticon to explain that the social capital of his university job, his academic funding and everything else about his positionality as an ethnographer enabled him to “construct a much wider range of intertextual relationships between discourses” (1996: 457) than the other individuals involved in constructing certain practices as “authentic” or “inventions of tradition” (including indigenous performers, state officials, and so forth). The exigencies of my own comparable situation will be explored further in this chapter and throughout the dissertation, but here I want make clear that I do not see my role as one of “evaluating claims ... regarding the ‘authenticity’” of any type of action (Briggs 1996: 458), but rather one of presenting all possible perspectives to the extent possible.

own self-worth through the assertion of identity. Philosopher Charles Taylor has argued that political recognition of a group and its constitutive members' distinctive identities, "is not just a courtesy we owe people", but in fact, "a vital human need" (1992: 26). Laura Graham (2005) has taken this argument a step further to suggest that "existential recognition" at the popular level is a necessary precondition for indigenous peoples' equality within modern multicultural polities.<sup>8</sup> As Graham puts it, the political projects of the Xavante indigenous group in Brazil are, "designed to change the Xavante's status within the broader public sphere from unknown to known, from not existing (– existence) to existing (+ existence) within a wide nonindigenous public consciousness" (2005: 632). Such transformations can alleviate the negative effects of non-recognition or misrecognition, which, according to Taylor, "can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (1992: 25). Moving from the psychological to the economic effects of misrecognition, Appadurai suggests that, "poverty is partly a matter of operating with extremely weak resources where the terms of recognition are concerned" (2004: 82), and that the foundation for developing capacity for economic development is community control of the "terms of recognition".

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<sup>8</sup> Chapter 6 describes Thangmi positionalities in relation to the transnational discourse of indigeneity.

Many Thangmi indeed feel that they have suffered a range of negative effects from a history of “misrecognition”. These are variously expressed in the psychological terms of having an “inferiority complex” (see Chapter 3), the economic terms of poverty, the social terms of exclusion and discrimination (see Chapter 4), and the cultural terms of “backwardness” (see Chapter 5). In social interactions, Thangmi often find that they are mistaken for Kami, a *dalit* blacksmith caste, or Dhami, a socially marginalized group of folk healers, due to the similar sounds of their names.<sup>9</sup> They are just as frequently misrecognized as members of other ethnic groups, such as Tamang or Kirant, both by the general public, scholars, and members of those groups who seek to claim the Thangmi population as part of their own.<sup>10</sup> Basant (the General Secretary of the BTWA for several years until his death in 2003), who had been born and raised in Darjeeling, explained in an interview, “In school, other kids would tease me as Kami, so I really wanted to study Thangmi history so I could respond and fight back. The more I studied, the more I realized I couldn’t understand without going to Nepal.”

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<sup>9</sup> This homophony led Darjeeling-based poets in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to frequently use “Thami” and “Kami” as the final syllables in rhyming couplets that described the Nepali community of Darjeeling. For example, see Chalmers’ citation of Parasmani Pradhan (n.d.): “Limbu, Jimdar, Tamang, Khas, Magar, Gurung, Hayu, Chepang and Kami; Sunwar, Lapche, Kusunda, Giripuri, Thakuri, Tharu, Newar, Thami; calling ourselves the Nepali jati and all speaking the Nepali language; saying that this indeed is our language, [all] respect the mother tongue with mind and body” (Chalmers 2003: 236).

<sup>10</sup> Tanka Bahadur Rai (2041 VS) states that the total Thangmi population is around 70,000, which should be added to the total numbers of the Kirant population. Similarly, Uttar Kumar Rai (1997) claims that since the Thangmi language is related to the Kiranti languages, the Thangmi population should be classified as “Kirant”.



Thangmi in Nepal and India, including those who spend time in both countries, are indeed bound together by their name and its history. Encoding caste, ethnicity, religion, and/or regional origin, names carry a contemporary power which is a legacy of historical classification projects: Nepal's Muluki Ain—the 1854 national legal code which rigidified caste and ethnic hierarchies (Höfer 2004 [1979])—and the colonial Anthropological Survey of India (Cohn 1987) respectively. While in both countries, “Thami” is the group's official name, and this is what appears on citizenship cards in Nepal or ration cards in India, typically as a surname, the term is an ambiguous signifier. Members of the group for the most part prefer their own ethnonym, “Thangmi”, to describe themselves whenever possible,<sup>11</sup> while most non-Thangmi are unfamiliar with either “Thami” or “Thangmi”. Neither name conveys enough information for outsiders to easily categorize those who hold it, since most people in Nepal and India simply do not know what ‘Thami’, and even less ‘Thangmi’, indexes in terms of ethnicity, religion or region.

“*Thami ke ho?*” “What is Thami?” is a common Nepali language refrain which all Thangmi hear throughout their lives in both Nepal and India. As Nirmala, a young woman from the village of Dumkot in

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<sup>11</sup> In Darjeeling, the term “Thangmi” is used less often in public contexts, both because most Thangmi in India do not speak the Thangmi language in which this ethnonym is used, and because they are concerned that using a different name than the one by which they are officially classified might unduly complicate their efforts to gain government recognition as a Scheduled Tribe. However, in private conversations several Thangmi expressed to me that if it were administratively possible, they would like to change their name to “Thangmi” in India. The politics of this issue are described further in Chapter 7.

Dolakha, whose father and brothers had been to India often (although she had never been herself), explained:

Everyone in the bazaar asks, “*Thami ke ho*”. I want to tell them “*Yo Thami ho*”—“This is Thami” [pointing to herself]. But that is not enough, we need to know our history and culture so we can explain. Some of the books published in Darjeeling which I have read, like this one, are very helpful in that way.

Nirmala held up a copy of the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association’s 2003 publication, *Niko Bachinte* (“Our Morning” in Thangmi).

Superimposed over a photo of a Thangmi guru in Nepal (which I had taken early in my fieldwork), the text on the back cover of the publication began with the question, “*Thami ke ho?*” [see Figure 1.1].

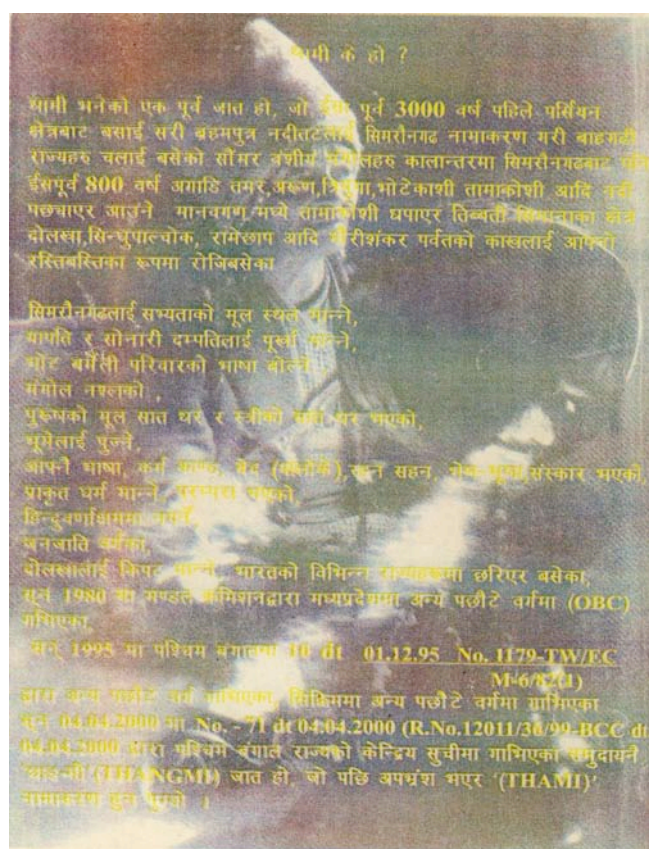


Figure 1.1 Back cover of *Niko Bachinte*: “*Thami ke ho?*” at the top

What was often encountered as a flippant query from curious outsiders had become a burning rhetorical question that the community posed to themselves to answer. Unpacked somewhat, the question actually means, “How do you fit into familiar systems of classification?”, or, “Where is your place in the social order?” (cf. Douglas 1966). As will become clear below, the lack of clear signification of the Thangmi ethnonym derives in part from a history of misrecognition, which many Thangmi have themselves exacerbated by intentionally misrepresenting themselves as members of other better-known groups. The result is that despite their different citizenships and life experiences in Nepal and India, the current generation of Thangmi are drawn together by their desire for an “existential recognition” (Graham 2005) of a distinctive cultural presence, which might help fill the discursive absence surrounding their name.

*Missing: the Thangmi from Himalayan Anthropology*

Why have the Thangmi been so misrecognized, at worst missing entirely from scholarship, as well as political and popular discourse, and at best conflated with other groups with whom they in fact have little linguistic, cultural or religious commonality? Was there something about the way they conceptualized or produced their identity which made them undesirable research subjects, or made them unrecognizable to the states in which they lived? Or had they intentionally avoided attention? My early interest in the Thangmi was in

part driven by the desire to understand this complex set of historical and epistemological questions, to understand how and why the Thangmi discursive absence from the existing scholarship and identity politics of the region had been constructed over time, particularly in relation to the rich cultural presence that I had observed in Thangmi ritual practice. My still incomplete explanation lies at the intersection of the unusually synthetic nature of Thangmi identity production with the histories of anthropology and state formation in the Himalayas.

The anthropology of Nepal began in earnest in the 1950s, when the country's Rana rulers opened its borders to the outside world. After World War II, the emphasis in anthropology lay in documenting "culture", then still defined as a discrete set of traits attached in a primordial manner to unique and bounded ethnic groups. At the same time, the early attempts of the Nepali nation-state to codify ethnicity through the Muluki Ain had provided what appeared to be a comprehensive list of groups awaiting study when the country opened for research. The 1854 legal code provided the skeletal framework upon which modern notions of ethnic identity have been built in Nepal over the last 150 years (Höfer 2004 [1979]), and the Thangmi were not in it.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In addition to Höfer's annotated translation of the Muluki Ain itself (2004 [1979]), other works that have contributed substantially to our understanding of the historical processes of ethnicity and nation formation in Nepal include Burghart (1984), Levine (1987), Holmberg (1989), Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka and Whelpton (1997), Fisher (2001) and Guneratne (2002).

Brian Houghton Hodgson's (1874, 1880) work on Nepal's peoples in his capacity as British Resident further solidified the nascent caste and ethnic categories propagated in the *Muluki Ain*.<sup>13</sup> Since the Ranas did not allow Hodgson out of Kathmandu, he never conducted ethnographic research *per se*, working rather with several high-caste assistants who collected data throughout the country and shared their notes with him back in Kathmandu. Hodgson's ethnic and linguistic classifications provided the descriptive backdrop from which many of the first ethnographers to work in Nepal after 1950 chose their subjects of study, as well as the classificatory schemas through which they interpreted their data (Holmberg 1988). Hodgson did not refer to the Thangmi in his substantial corpus of materials on Himalayan languages and ethnology. The Thangmi first appear in colonial materials in George Grierson's 1909 Linguistic Survey of India with what contributing author Sten Konow calls "incomplete" data, collected entirely from a population of 319 Thangmi speakers enumerated in India (mostly in Darjeeling and Sikkim) in the 1901 census (Grierson 1909: 280–281).<sup>14</sup>

Seeking distinctive groups that could be studied in their totality within single villages, the first generation of Himalayanists was

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<sup>13</sup> For a recent analysis of Hodgson's contributions to Himalayan Studies, see Waterhouse (2004).

<sup>14</sup> Hodgson's comparative vocabulary of the "Eastern Sub-Himalayas" lists the following groups: Sherpa, Lhopa, Lepcha, Limbu, Kiranti, Murmi [later known as Tamang], Newar, Gurung, Magar and Sunwar (1874: Tables 1 – 4, preceding part II). Additional essays describe the "broken tribes" of the eastern Himalayas, but nowhere are the Thangmi mentioned.

attracted to a range of field sites afforded by Nepal's ethnic diversity. As Holmberg, March, and Tamang explain, "anthropology in its focus on specific kinds of questions has, with notable exceptions, produced an ahistorical image of Nepal as an array of discrete societies and cultures" (1999: 7–8). The Austrian count Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf conducted one of the earliest and most well-known of such studies, detailing the Sherpa (1964). He was soon followed by others, such as French ethnographer Bernard Pignède, who studied the Gurung (1993 [1966]) and American John Hitchcock who focused on the Magar (1966). Groups not listed as discrete units early on, either in the Muluki Ain or in surveys like Hodgson's and Sylvain Lévi's (1905), were in general not selected for ethnographic study in this era. The anthropological paradigm of culture, as it was understood at the time, intersected with existing local dynamics to privilege certain ethnographic subjects over others within the "regional ethnography traditions" of Nepal (Fardon 1990). Some groups, such as the Thakali and Sherpa, have received extensive scholarly attention disproportionate to their small population size, while others, such as the Thangmi, have received almost none, despite their relatively large population.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The 15,000 strong Thakali population of lower Mustang was already the most studied ethnic group in Nepal by 1985, being the subject of over fifty published works by fifteen different scholars of various disciplines (Turin 1997: 187). The Sherpa have been scrutinized in a similar manner. See particularly Adams (1996) and Ortner (1999a, b) for two views on how this extensive ethnographizing has shaped Sherpa identities.

Beyond Mark Turin's recent in-depth description of the Thangmi language (2006), which shows that Thangmi is a distinctive Tibeto-Burman tongue most likely related to both the Rai-Kiranti and Newar languages, it remains the case today that there is no authoritative social scientific work on the Thangmi.<sup>16</sup> The very small body of existing material on the group is largely inaccessible, in the form of Creighton Peet's unpublished 1978 PhD thesis,<sup>17</sup> the fieldnotes of Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (who passed through the area several times but never made an in-depth study of it) and the French linguist Genevieve Stein (who worked in the village of Alampu in the 1970s, but never published her findings), and locally published materials that are now out-of-print or otherwise hard to track down (Sapkota 2045 VS; Toba 1990).<sup>18</sup> Newspaper articles in the Nepali media are another source of information, but with some notable exceptions (Lall 1966), these are generally based on secondary sources of questionable veracity and tend to represent the Thangmi in a folkloristic idiom, casting them as a quaint, "backwards" group worth noticing for their cultural oddities,

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<sup>16</sup> The Thangmi/Thami language has long been a subject of discussion in work on comparative linguistic classification (Benedict 1972; van Driem 2001, 2003; Grierson 1909; Shafer 1966, 1974; Stein 1972; Toba 1990), but Turin was the first to do extensive field research on the language and its speakers.

<sup>17</sup> Creighton Peet's 1978 thesis did not focus on the Thangmi in particular, but rather on economics and migration in general in an unnamed village in Dolakha district. However, a substantial proportion of his informants were Thangmi, and his thesis contains a wealth of asides about Thangmi life, which are cited as appropriate throughout this dissertation.

<sup>18</sup> Father Casper Miller's *Faith Healers in the Himalaya* (1997 [1979]) is a notable exception: it has been reprinted in Nepal and India several times and is still readily available. Although not exclusively about the Thangmi, it contains two chapters that describe Thangmi ritual practice in the broader multi-ethnic context of Dolakha district. I discuss Miller's work in detail in Chapter 8.

such as their supposed belief that they are “the offspring of yeti” (Manandhar 2001).<sup>19</sup>

In several compendia, the Thangmi are classified as a sub-group of other better-known groups, such as the Tamang (Bista 1967: 48; Gaborieau 1978: 107; Majupuria and Majupuria 1978: 60, 1980: 57), Kiranti (Lévi, as cited in Riccardi 1975: 23), or even Parbatiya Hindus—the Gurkha officer Eden Vansittart believed that they were “one of the Adhikari clans” of the “Khas grouping” (1918: 70).<sup>20</sup> A debate about the meaning of the ethnonym “Thangmi”—which most likely derives either from the Tibetan *mtha’ mi* “people of the border” or *thang mi* “people of the steppe”—is quite literally relegated to the footnotes of Himalayan anthropology.<sup>21</sup> Summarizing the probable historical relationships between Himalayan groups, Nick Allen suggests that the ethnonym of what he calls, “the lowly Thami” (1978: 11, n.2), may be related to Tamang, Thakali or Gurung ethnonyms, citing footnotes from the work of well-known Himalayanists Alexander Macdonald and Michael Oppitz to back up this proposition. Such references seem to

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<sup>19</sup> Original Nepali: *Yetiko santan*. This assertion has no basis in Thangmi cultural practice, and when this article was published, the Nepal Thami Samaj submitted a critical letter to the editor refuting Manadhar’s claims. Some time later, NTS members also protested when a Manandhar was awarded a prestigious journalism prize. However, Dolakha-based Manadhar’s journalism on the Thangmi (the article cited here is only one of several on a range of topics) seems to strike a popular chord with the general Nepali public by using the discourse of “wildness” (cf. Skaria 1999) to fetishize the Thangmi as an indigenous oddity.

<sup>20</sup> Linguistically speaking, Thangmi share more with the Kiranti Rai and Limbu groups than with the Tamang, and if asked to state which groups they feel closest to, most Thangmi will cite the Rai and Limbu. However, due to their residence in an area with a substantial Tamang population, they have more often been erroneously classified as a Tamang sub-group. See Chapter 3 for details of indigenous Thangmi schemes of ethnic classification.

<sup>21</sup> See Turin (2006) for details of these possible etymologies.



take on a life of their own, with more recent scholarly works repeatedly citing the same supposition without offering new evidence (Steinmann 1996: 180; Pommaret 1999: 65–66; Fisher 2001: 224, n.13). A recruitment manual for the Gurkha regiments of the British Army, although recognizing the Thangmi as a distinct group, sums up the prevailing attitude towards them with the abrupt dismissal: “Coarse in appearance, and the inferior of the other races in social and religious matters, they do not merit further description” (Northey and Morris 1928: 260).

### *Ethnic Politics, Complicity and the Ethnographic Contract*

This lack of available and accurate scholarly material about the Thangmi is not simply an abstract academic concern. It also has concrete consequences within the crucible of contemporary *janajati* (indigenous nationality) and tribal politics within the nation-states of Nepal and India respectively, both contexts in which ethnographic monographs, articles, and public exposure are important sources of real and symbolic capital for those agitating for increased recognition and benefits from the Nepali and Indian states.<sup>22</sup> In Nepal, the Nepal Thami Samaj (NTS) is a member organization of the Janajati Mahasangh (also known in English as the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, or NEFIN), and is working within that framework for

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<sup>22</sup> See Gellner (2007) and Hangen (2007) for recent histories of the *janajati* movement, and Jaffrelot (2006), Shah (2007), and Kapila (2008) for comparable reviews of tribal politics in India. Chapter 5 of this dissertation describes Thangmi experiences of both in depth.

political rights, as well as development dollars from the INGOs who support the Nepali state.<sup>23</sup> In India, where the Thangmi have been listed as an Other Backwards Class (OBC) since 1995, the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association (BTWA) is engaged in the process of applying for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, both at the state and central levels. Although the history of anthropology, classification, and state policy on either side of the border have led to different specific equations for recognition, the fact remains that in both countries today, being a people without an ethnography is tantamount to being invisible, or at least unrecognizable, to the state and other outside observers. These dynamics will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5, here I provide a brief contextualizing introduction.

Since Nepal's 1990 return to democracy,<sup>24</sup> the generation of Thangmi who have come of age during the era of *janajati* politics (roughly speaking, those between 20 – 40) have begun to make conscious decisions to valorize Thangmi identity at the national level rather than retreating from it. Many activists involved with campaigns for national recognition and cultural preservation have spent much of their lives in urban Kathmandu, away from the rural villages where ritual is most conspicuously practiced under the direction of Thangmi

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<sup>23</sup> Over the last decade in Nepal, the Maoist movement has provided an alternative framework for making political claims on the state. I have detailed the ways in which many Thangmi have become involved with Maoist ideology and practice elsewhere (Shneiderman 2003; Shneiderman and Turin 2004); here I focus for the most part on identity-based agendas.

<sup>24</sup> See Hoftun, Raeper and Whelpton (1999) for a good overview of this political transformation.

gurus. Such activists are often unfamiliar with the divine terms of recognition offered by territorial deities, and therefore place more value on political recognition from the state. During the period in which I began fieldwork, the Nepali state had no system of affirmative action, no promised benefits for those who could demonstrate ethnic uniqueness, no national forum in which cultural performances were encouraged and accorded political clout, and much less a sympathetic official audience. But the situation is now changing rapidly: in May 2008, the first-ever elected Constitutional Assembly met for the first time. Some of the major items on the agenda for deliberation during the assembly's two-year tenure were federal restructuring along ethnic lines, and developing a system of affirmative action.<sup>25</sup> In these circumstances, having a recognizable identity encoded in an ethnographic tome—the heavier the better—seems newly important to those groups concerned about receiving adequate recognition in a state that may well be restructured along ethnic lines.

In India, by contrast, there has long been a dialectic between indigenous self-representation and state-sponsored ethnography (Cohn 1987, Dirks 1992), which resulted in legally-binding ethnic and caste classifications. In particular, the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, as promulgated in 1950, provides for the “upliftment” of marginalized groups through official recognition (known as

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<sup>25</sup> See Middleton and Shneiderman (2008) for a discussion of these current issues.

“scheduling”) and quotas.<sup>26</sup> Since the late 1990s, the Thangmi in India have been focused on securing Scheduled Tribe (ST) status within the reservations system, which would offer them perceived political, educational and economic benefits.<sup>27</sup> These descendants of Thangmi migrants, who left Nepal as long as 150 years ago, for the most part no longer speak the Thangmi language, and often grew up in environments where Thangmi ritual practitioners were not part of their experience.<sup>28</sup> But in the process of applying for ST status—for which groups must provide as much ethnographic evidence as possible—many Thangmi in India have recently become interested in rediscovering Thangmi “culture”, particularly through the mode of what they call “collection”.<sup>29</sup> This refers both to compiling existing publications about themselves, and doing their own ethnographic and linguistic research—often along with audio or video recording to

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<sup>26</sup> There is an extensive literature on the history of Scheduled Tribes and Castes in India; see especially Galanter (1984) and Jenkins (2003).

<sup>27</sup> Before applying for Scheduled Tribe status, the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association submitted their application for recognition as an “Other Backwards Class” (OBC) in 1992, a designation which they received in 1995 at the West Bengal state level. Then, inspired by the success of the Tamang and Limbu communities in attaining ST status in 2003, the Thangmi submitted their official application in 2005.

<sup>28</sup> See Hutt (1998) for a description of the motivations for migration from Nepal to Darjeeling. Kennedy (1996) provides a general history of Darjeeling.

<sup>29</sup> Nowhere does the Indian Constitution specifically mention the criteria for recognizing Scheduled Tribes. It is only after some digging that one finds the semi-official criteria established in 1965 by the Lokur Committee, which are: a) Indication of primitive traits; b) Distinctive culture; c) Geographical isolation; d) Shyness of contact with the community at large; e) Backwardness. (I am grateful to Townsend Middleton for providing these details.) Although there is no official statement requiring groups to submit ethnographic materials, the first two points above are almost universally interpreted by applicant groups to mean that ethnographic materials are required.

“document” and “videoalize” (both terms used by Thangmi in English) Thangmi cultural practice.

The potential for social science research to contribute to such ethnic movements, as well as to become complicit in them, has been discussed at length by scholars working elsewhere in the world, particularly in Latin America (Fischer 1999; Warren and Jackson 2002; Hale 2006) and Australia (Myers 2002; Povinelli 2002). In these regions, scholars (both foreign and native) have contributed ethnographic knowledge to indigenous land rights claims, cultural performances, and various other mediations between the indigenous groups they work with, and broader national and international publics. The results of such engagement between scholar and subject are always complex, and rarely morally clear-cut, which has led some scholars to suggest that social science and indigenous activism are best kept separate (Lecomte-Tilouine and Dollfus 2003). Such arguments deny the unavoidably fraught nature of entering into what we might call the “ethnographic contract”, in which information about, and access to, a desired set of knowledge and actions is exchanged for some form of social scientific recognition. Often this contract remains unspoken, and certainly unsigned, yet it evokes expectations and aspirations on all sides from the moment that we first engage with those from whom we wish to collect what is termed “data”, in a terse turn of phrase that explicitly excludes the intersubjective aspect of the ethnographic project. In exchange for our data, I believe that scholars

conducting ethnographic work have an ethical responsibility to, at the very least, investigate potential avenues for contributing to the agendas of those with whom we work. In the Thangmi case, these include bolstering the group's public profile through the production of social scientific knowledge about them.

Charles Hale (2006) has recently shown how this kind of engagement with subaltern communities, which he calls "activist research", may conflict with the prevailing model of cultural critique (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986) across the social sciences. Hale contrasts the two approaches, arguing that activist research, although always politically compromised, has the potential to create uniquely generative theoretical spaces that move beyond the institutional academic commitments of cultural critique:

Cultural critique, and the approach to ethnography it has spawned, is politically positioned, with primary (or even exclusive) commitments to the institutional space from which it emanates. Activist research, in contrast, affirms dual political commitments from the start. Activist anthropologists attempt to be loyal both to the space of critical scholarly production and to the principles and practices of people who struggle outside the academic setting. These dual political commitments transform our research methods directly: from the formulation of the research topic to the dissemination of results, they require collaboration, dialogue, and standards of accountability that conventional methods can, and regularly do, leave out of the equation. ... Activist research involves commitments that are not accountable to arbitration, evaluation, or regulation from within academia. Instead, it requires constant mediation between these two spaces, insisting that one need not choose between them nor collapse one into the other.

Dual loyalties to an organized group in struggle and to rigorous academic analysis often are not fully compatible with one another. They stand in tension, and at times, the tension turns to outright contradiction. At the same time, such tension is often highly productive. It not only yields research outcomes that are potentially useful to the political struggle with which one is aligned; but it can also generate new insight and knowledge that challenge and transform conventional academic wisdom. (2006: 104–105)

Cultural critique's shift away from traditional ethnographic practice is often justified by highlighting the shortcomings of the earlier theoretical paradigms on which such ethnographic works were based, in particular their tendency to essentialize communities as bounded and frozen in time. Hale suggests that although the arbiters of cultural critique have positioned their theoretical approach as the only one that can adequately represent subaltern voices in a non-essentialized, politically correct manner, they face a problem when subaltern communities themselves choose to use theoretically unfashionable categories to advance their struggles:

As long as the heavy weapons of deconstruction are aimed at the powerful, the proposal remains on high ground. But what about the other "sites" of a multisited ethnography? How do we responsibly address situations in which the relatively powerless are using these same vexed categories to advance their struggles? (2006: 102)

This is precisely the situation I have encountered while working with the Thangmi in the era of identity politics in South Asia. Whatever my initial scholarly impulse might have been to demonstrate the constructedness of Thangmi ethnic identity, I have repeatedly been asked by a range of Thangmi individuals—including activists, ritual

practitioners, and just plain old people who have bumped up against the problem of misrecognition in their daily lives—to provide an essentializing ethnographic portrait of “the Thangmi” as a unified, unique, and historically unchanging group.<sup>30</sup> Why shouldn’t they want this, when, for instance, an early request to the Government of India for recognition as a Scheduled Tribe was met with rejection and the directive to, “... submit total ethnographic material of your caste to the ministry”?<sup>31</sup> Many anthropologists have made arguments along the lines of Sherry Ortner’s claim that, “the production of portraits of other cultures, no matter how well drawn, is in a sense no longer a major option” (1999a: 9). Yet it is precisely this definitive ethnographic portrait, presented in an authoritative academic voice, that many Thangmi desire, both as a validation of self-worth, and as a political tool. With no holistic portrait produced in the bygone days of anthropology when such work was not yet politically incorrect, why should Thangmi forgo this aspiration when their contemporaries in other Himalayan ethnic groups proudly brandish “their” ethnographies as important heritage objects that serve as evidence of their long-standing recognizability?

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<sup>30</sup> Although Nepali language materials are of more direct use to the communities themselves, English language materials are by and large perceived as having a higher prestige value, and are equally if not more in demand for political purposes.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from the Welfare Department of the Government of Sikkim sent to the President of the All Sikkim Thami Association, 13 October, 1999.



### *Strategies of Synthesis and Resistance*

For the Thangmi, as for many Himalayan groups, the desire to be recognized by social science and the state is relatively new, and entails a substantial transformation of earlier strategies of resistance. At the same time, Thangmi terms of engagement with a range of recognizing agents—divine, academic and political—are being rebalanced, although not altogether reconfigured.

Recalling that Gurkha recruiters dismissed the Thangmi as not worthy of further attention, it is not incidental that fortune-seeking Thangmi men in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century heyday of the British empire lied about their ethnic affiliation so that they could join the Gurkhas as “Rai” or “Gurung”. As an elderly Thangmi man who had returned to his home village in Nepal after spending much of his youth in India explained, “At that time, if you said you were Thangmi, you just wouldn’t get a job”. As another man of the same generation who settled in Darjeeling put it, “You had to lie about your ethnicity to fill your stomach”. These are only some of the many ways in which Thangmi have been complicit in fomenting their own misrecognition over time. Historically, land and labor exploitation under the Rana and Shah regimes compelled Thangmi in Nepal to remain under the radar of state recognition whenever possible.<sup>32</sup> Fear of the state, which

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<sup>32</sup> Personal communication from Genevieve Stein, who described the Thangmi with whom she worked in Alampu village in the late 1960s – early 1970s “running and hiding” whenever state representatives approached. For general discussions of land tenure and state/local relations in Nepal see Caplan (2000 [1970]), Regmi (1976), and Holmberg, March and Tamang (1999).

primarily manifested in its tax-collecting form (older Thangmi still sometimes call representatives of the state “black men”), encouraged the insular maintenance of cultural practices, with the intentional avoidance of public forms of cultural objectification that might attract curious outsiders. As many Thangmi elders told me, they actually counted themselves lucky not to have been listed in the 1854 legal code of the Muluki Ain. This lacuna—which meant that the Thangmi name remained little known outside their localized area of residence—encouraged Thangmi to misrepresent themselves as members of better known ethnic groups in encounters with authority. Although such behavior was at some level a strategy of resistance intended to avoid the potential for additional domination if they were to be noticed and classified by the state, it has over time created a vicious cycle in which contemporary Thangmi seeking employment or education in national arenas find that there is little or no name recognition of their ethnic moniker. In response, they have long continued to represent themselves as members of other groups rather than going to great, and often distressing, lengths to explain to others how the Thangmi actually fit (and do not fit) within rigidly stratified caste and ethnic hierarchies.

One of the common reactions to such negative experiences was to migrate to India and beyond (particularly to Darjeeling and Sikkim, but also as far as Assam, Bhutan and Burma), either temporarily or permanently. But in India a different set of dynamics shifted desires

away from recognition as the discrete group “Thangmi”; until the early 1990s most Indian citizens of Nepali heritage in Darjeeling had been focused on building a pan-Nepali identity and agitating for the separate Nepali-speaking state of Gorkhaland within India.<sup>33</sup> Seeking recognition as “Thangmi” made little sense in that political moment, in which inter-group difference was played down, and the long-standing practice of inter-ethnic marriage in Darjeeling was valorized as the means of creating a pan-Nepali identity which transcended hierarchy and difference.

The violent Gorkhaland movement ended in 1989 with the creation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), an ostensibly autonomous council which was intended to cater to the specific needs of Darjeeling’s Nepali-speaking community.<sup>34</sup> The creation of the DGHC was followed in quick succession by the causally unrelated, but equally important, implementation of the Mandal Commission report in 1990, which revised India’s existing reservations system to create a new and improved set of benefits for those groups classed as Scheduled Tribes. With the promise of Gorkhaland fading, and a sense of disillusionment that the leadership had settled too quickly for the DGHC instead of a separate state, many groups of Nepali heritage at that time began to pursue the possibility of gaining recognition as

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<sup>33</sup> The formation of Nepali national identity in Darjeeling in the literary sphere has been well-documented by Onta (1996a, 1996b, 1999); Hutt (1997, 1998) and Chalmers (2003). Subba (1992) has written a thorough social history of the Gorkhaland movement.

<sup>34</sup> See van Beek (2000) for a broader discussion of the autonomous hill council concept as implemented in Ladakh.

Scheduled Tribes, as a new way of making claims on the Indian state. This strategy, however, required a complete turnabout in attitude towards ethnic identity: during the Gorkhaland movement, the fight had been for recognition of “Nepali” as a unitary ethnic category, but now the battle was on for recognition of each individual group—Tamang, Limbu, Magar, Thangmi, and so forth—as separate “tribal” units.

Despite the increasing emphasis on Thangmi identity as a positive asset in both Nepal and India since 1990 (albeit for different specific reasons), disclaiming Thangminess remains a common strategy to forestall an uncomfortable barrage of questions from those unfamiliar with the Thangmi name. This is perhaps best understood as a self-defense mechanism. When I first began working in the Thangmi area in rural Nepal in the late 1990s, I would excitedly approach groups of people whom I heard speaking the Thangmi language in Charikot, the Dolakha district headquarters, only to be met with a quick switch into Nepali to answer my question, “Are you Thangmi?”, with a definitive “no”. Only several months into my first round of fieldwork was my reputation well-established enough to mediate such awkward experiences.

Why did this happen, and how does such a defensive reaction that initially seeks to *avoid* recognition articulate with what I have described above as the Thangmi desire *for* recognition? Such ambivalence suggests that Thangmi may evaluate the different “terms

of recognition” offered by disparate “recognizing agents”—the state(s), researchers, their own deities—and weigh the pros and cons of being recognized in each context at each historical and individual moment. Why point yourself out to the state if it only extracts resources rather than offering them? Why identify yourself to a researcher who may not honor the terms of the ethnographic contract, at best failing to contribute anything of use to you, despite taking up your time, and at worst exacerbating existing problems of misrecognition? Opting out of such relatively uncontrollable regimes of recognition becomes a more viable option if, rather than the state, your most reliable source of “existential recognition” is in fact a territorial deity, like Bhume, whose beneficence can be ensured through the enactment of appropriate rituals. In return, such deities rarely fail to provide rain, sun, fertile soil, and perhaps most importantly, a sense of belonging, engendered by a special relationship with divine territorial powers, a relationship which does not require mediation from other entities like social science or the state. Chapters 2 and 6 of this dissertation develop the argument that territorial deities have long been primary recognizing agents for the Thangmi, even as many Thangmi have moved away from the territory in which those deities are believed to abide. Here, the point I wish to make is that although clearly tactics of recognition can be used as instruments of state domination, such arguments must be considered in tandem with explorations of the dynamics of recognition in other domains, such as the sacred, therefore shaking up the

assumption that the subjective desire for recognition is an exclusive creation of the “cunning” neoliberal state (Povinelli 2002: 16–17).

The point of departure for understanding how Thangmi have historically controlled the terms of recognition in their interactions with outsiders is the manner in which Thangmi gurus and other community elders tend to respond to questions about Thangmi culture: with the assertion that there is no such thing. As Panchaman, a senior guru from the village of Phaselung in Dolakha district phrased this common refrain, “What? There is no Thangmi culture.”<sup>35</sup> Such statements deny that the Thangmi have *sanskriti*, a Nepali term which evokes the “high culture” sense of “culture”, as defined in particular by the “great traditions” of Hinduism and Buddhism with their perceived purity, historical longevity, and textual authority. In the every day life of Thangmi villages, there is indeed little material culture—no icons, art, architecture, texts, or costumes—recognizable as distinctively Thangmi in these terms. One can imagine why anthropologists seeking fertile ground for the study of culture might pass over a people whom not only have few objects demonstrating their culture, but outright deny that they have one.

This apparent absence of recognizable cultural objects from non-Thangmi perspectives is belied by a rich cultural presence enacted through practice within the Thangmi community itself. Panchaman and others like him, who are quick to refute the notion of “Thangmi

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<sup>35</sup> Original Nepali: *Kohi? Thangmi sanskriti kehi pani chhaina.*

culture” in discourse, spend their lives engaged in the production of it through the practice of myth, ritual, kinship, migration and daily life. Primarily conducted in the Thangmi language, by Thangmi gurus in conversation with localized territorial deities, these practices are deeply synthetic in the sense that they incorporate both Buddhist and Hindu motifs within the framework of shamanic practice, but they result in a synthesis that is uniquely Thangmi.

This is just one of the ways that Thangmi cultural life is shot through with motifs of religious syncretism, linguistic creolisation, and racial hybridity.<sup>36</sup> In the Thangmi origin story, chanted at the beginning of every ritual, the religion, language and even “racial” provenance of the Thangmi are explicitly articulated as being of mixed origin, as will be described in detail in Chapter 3. It is through the practice of such synthesis on an everyday basis that individuals become full members of the Thangmi cultural world. Such forms of mixture in themselves become definitive ethnic markers, resulting in a self-consciously synthetic mode of cultural production, which sets Thangmi identity apart from that of many other groups within Nepal. I do not mean to suggest that other groups are empirically any more “pure”—on racial, cultural, religious or linguistic levels—but rather that the Thangmi not only speak openly of the common processes of synthesis which other

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<sup>36</sup> I follow Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart in defining syncretism as “the politics of religious synthesis” (1994: 7).

groups vehemently deny, but actively draw upon such mixture as a source for establishing their own sense of distinctiveness.<sup>37</sup>

This emphasis on synthesis of all sorts, however, does not help in establishing a cultural presence within either Nepali or Indian national frameworks for categorizing ethnicity. Nepal's Muluki Ain enshrined Hindu ideological principles that emphasized essentialist notions of cultural and religious purity, while India's colonial classification projects reified pre-existing notions of "caste" and "tribe" (Dirks 2001). Perhaps unintentionally, the early anthropological tradition in both countries served to reinforce such ideas by disseminating its limited definition of culture within elite academic and political circles. Paradoxically, while Western social science has now gone to considerable lengths to disavow an essentialist understanding of culture, ethnic activists in Nepal and India have appropriated these very concepts of purity and autochthony and deployed them as political tools in their campaigns for indigenous rights vis-à-vis the states in which they live, which are perceived to require such

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<sup>37</sup> At a 2003 conference in Kathmandu (Agenda for Transformation, organized by Social Science Baha) David Gellner presented a paper entitled "Public Order, Inclusion, Hybridity: Some Preconditions of Democracy in Nepal", in which he suggested that most groups in Nepal had hybrid histories. I watched several ethnic activists critique Gellner's argument aggressively, an exchange which continued in the Himalayan Times as several editorials and letters argued that a recognition of hybrid histories could never be in janajati interests. Gellner's original paper remains unpublished but is available online at: <<http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/midea/pdf/darticle1.pdf>>; the Himalayan Times exchange can be accessed at: <<http://www.nepalresearch.org/archive/society/ethnicity/archive.htm>>. Both sites were last accessed on November 30, 2008.



essentialist self-representations in exchange for official recognition.<sup>38</sup> This is precisely the dynamic that Charles Hale highlights in the passage quoted above.

Thangmi self-representations as “lacking culture”, then, are voiced in acknowledgement of the lack of obvious cultural objects—including a definitive ethnography or other social scientific publications—which would make the Thangmi easily recognizable within national systems that have advanced overly essentialized notions of “culture” as a static, pure, and clearly bounded thing maintained by discrete, homogeneous, and easily identifiable groups. The statement that “there is no Thangmi culture”, then, is not absolute, but contextual, taking on meaning only at the nation-state level in relation to perceived nationalist visions of “culture”—and therefore ethnicity—as inherent only in widely recognizable, objectified forms that can be used to easily classify discrete ethnic groups for state purposes. Such statements articulate an alternative “nation-view” (Duara 1995) of what it is to be a citizen of Nepal: that is, they make explicit the otherwise implicit hybridity underlying the very existence of Nepal as a nation. In this regard, Thangmi epistemologies have long recognized the nation-state’s formula for ethnicity, but ethnic consciousness has not been delimited exclusively by it.

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<sup>38</sup> These criteria and their interpretations by ethnic organizations are described in detail in Chapter 5.

With this in mind, we can see how at certain historical moments, claiming to have “no culture” can be a form of resistance (Scott 1985), a convenient way to escape the apparently negative consequences of domination that are perceived to follow from state recognition. Such strategies may be particularly effective in a situation in which, as suggested above, the primary recognizing agent from which people derive self-worth is a sacred one, rather than a temporal one embodied by the state. But if and when the situation changes and recognition from the state becomes perceived as a necessary complement to divine recognition, then a historical reliance on synthetic cultural forms can be a liability.<sup>39</sup> This is the juncture at which many Thangmi find themselves today, and the gap between the synthetic cultural practices that they know to be what makes them who they are, and their desire for a pure, distinct form of culture which can be easily objectified for political purposes often generates a great deal of subjective tension. In this context, an ethnography that symbolizes the former as the latter through the judicious use of social scientific framing can help show how such apparently contradictory forms of “culture” in action/ “no culture” in discourse can in fact both be part of the collective repertoire of a single group.

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<sup>39</sup> I am not suggesting that political recognition ever entirely eclipses divine recognition; rather, that for most modern subjects the two are mutually constitutive and equally important in varying balances for varying individuals. See Chapter 2 for further details of this argument.

*A Total Social Fact, or, “You Are Our God”*

My first serious Thangmi interlocutor in Nepal was Rana Bahadur Thami, the guru whose life story is described in detail in Chapter 3. Like the Thangmi speakers in the bazaar who evaded interaction with me by disclaiming Thangmi identity, this senior guru, who was well-known as a vast repository of cultural, historical and ritual knowledge, was at first reluctant to speak with me. Bir Bahadur, with whom I worked as a research assistant, explained that Rana Bahadur did not want to talk with me at all unless I was willing to record the entirety of his ritual knowledge. Rana Bahadur had apparently had several unsatisfying experiences with researchers—foreign as well as Thangmi and non-Thangmi from India and Nepal—who wanted quick summaries of “Thangmi culture”, but did not want to spend the time observing or listening to the dense ritual action and recitations which comprise it. He explained that the problem with writing (as will be further explored in Chapter 3), was that it allowed the writer to pick and choose what to represent, whereas the oral tradition in which he had been trained required the full recitation of the entire ritual “line” (he and other gurus regularly used this English word to denote the fixed trajectory of each invocation) from an embodied place of knowledge which made it impossible to extract any piece from the whole. Therefore, if I was to write, or otherwise record (since audio and video technologies were, from his perspective, just embellished forms

of writing), anything at all, I had to do be prepared to record everything he knew.

I told Rana Bahadur that I was ready to record and listen to as much as he wished to tell me. After several afternoons following the old guru's schedule and recording whatever he said, I seemed to pass Rana Bahadur's test. He announced that he was ready to "open" his knowledge to me, and every ensuing recording session (which covered diverse topics from life cycle rituals to origin stories to his life history to ethnobotanical knowledge and beyond) began with a chanted invocation in the same idiom used to propitiate deities, which went as follows:

So and so (names and nationalities of previous researchers) came but did not want to listen to all of my knowledge, so I bit my tongue ... Then they went back to their own countries, and this American woman came. She wanted to listen to everything and so I have opened my knowledge to her. I have sent as much as I know in her writing...and now the funerary rites can be done for this dead man.

With my rudimentary understanding of the Thangmi language in which Rana Bahadur primarily spoke, I initially thought that these lines were simply part of his standard invocation. Upon analyzing them closely with Bir Bahadur, I was embarrassed to discover that I had been written into the chant itself.

Initially I removed this part of the chant from all of my transcriptions, bracketing out Rana Bahadur's repeated references to me as an anomaly that I did not really know how to handle. If I had become part of the chant, was what I was recording the "genuine"

Thangmi culture that I sought, or was it already transformed by my very presence? (I was similarly disturbed when Darjeeling's Latte Apa began a mortuary ritual with the statement, "Because she's here, this time it'll definitely be done by the real, old rules!"<sup>40</sup>). These are surely hackneyed questions in the literature on post-colonialism, authenticity and anthropological practice, but in my early days as a researcher I needed to puzzle it out for myself.

Upon reflection, I came to see that from Rana Bahadur's perspective, I was a useful recognizing agent, who by appearing at the end of his life, provided a sense of reassurance that the knowledge he had gained through years of ritual practice remained relevant in an era when much around him seemed to be changing. Even after I thought I had recorded everything he had to tell me in 1999–2000, in the remaining years before he died in 2003, he contacted me several times with urgent messages to come to Dolakha so he could tell me one more thing before he died, which he invariably said he was preparing to do any day. For Rana Bahadur, my recognition of him as a holder of culturally valuable knowledge became a personal obsession, which seemed to have little to do with a desire to publicize Thangmi culture or seek political recognition. My recognition of his special relationship with the Thangmi deities who had been the primary recognizing agents throughout his life seemed to augment the feeling of self-worth that he gained from that divine relationship. Rana Bahadur never asked me

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<sup>40</sup> Original Nepali: *Waha basera yaspali pakka purano niyam hunchha!*

to publish what I had recorded with him, or to submit it to the Nepali or Indian state (as others later would); he accepted my terms of recognition and in exchange simply asked me to write down what he knew in its entirety without leaving anything out—to objectify his knowledge as a total social fact.

Despite the superficial differences in their approach to Thangmi culture, it was also in this holistic sense that the Thangmi ethnic activists whom I later came to know wanted me to contribute information to their efforts to portray Thangmi culture as an embodied social fact. As the late Gopal Singh, the then vice president of the BTWA, phrased this sentiment in the opening essay of the 2003 *Niko Bachinte* publication, “Language is our breath, culture is the whole body” (Niko 2003: 7).<sup>41</sup> Yet Thangmi identity, he continued, as embodied in “our pure language and pure culture”, has “not been fully brought to light” (Niko 2003: 7). In order to achieve these goals, Gopal Singh admonished “all the Thami-loving brothers and sisters to remain honest and loyal to this ethnicity and to collect and publish proven facts relating to the Thami” (Niko 2003: 7). This echoes a similar emphasis on “scientific fact” in Thangmi publications from Nepal, where “truth” about the ethnic group and its history is depicted as the hard-won fruit of “research” on a positivist “reality”. One essay, which denies the incest that gives rise to the Thangmi clans (see Chapter 7 for more details), suggests that such myths are to be discounted as

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<sup>41</sup> Original Nepali: *Bhasa hamro prana ho, sanskriti purnangka sarir*.

“unscientific” since they are only “stories collected from the elders” rather than the results of “comprehensive research” (Samudaya 2061 [2056] VS: 17).

What did such statements imply about the value of my so-called “research”? If elders were not a legitimate source of authority about the culture and history of a community whose identity had long been premised on the embodied power of oral tradition to establish Thangminess as a total social fact, then what was? In “reality”, there was no alternative, more legitimate source of evidence for the claims that Thangmi activists in both Nepal and India wanted me to help them make. My sources—like Rana Bahadur—were the very “elders” whose knowledge was dismissed as “stories”, rather than evidence. But I felt compelled to honor my ethnographic contract with such elders by representing the stories they told me in their totality, even when such stories did not seem to yield the specific “research results” that my simultaneously binding ethnographic contract with activist informants stipulated.

As I began to wade deeper into the ethical complexities of such multi-sited complicity (Marcus 1999) during my first in-depth fieldwork in Darjeeling in 2004, I lost sleep trying to figure out how my “research” fit into the picture and what it was that the Thangmi activists whom I was coming to know actually wanted from me. On the one hand, they were skeptical of what the empirical evidence that I had collected told them about themselves. On the other hand, they

repeatedly thanked me for sharing my research openly with them, telling me on numerous occasions, “You (respectful form) are our god”, or “You are our Sunari Ama”, the Thangmi ancestral mother (described in detail in Chapter 6).<sup>42</sup> Being cast in this role as a quasi-divine culture creator felt not only uncomfortable, just as Rana Bahadur’s incorporation of me into his ritual chant had, but antithetical to the activists’ erstwhile requests for me to conduct positivistic, “scientific” research aimed at demonstrating a “pure” culture. At first I consigned such statements to the same conceptual category of inexplicable fieldwork ephemera in which I had put Rana Bahadur’s invocation of my presence. But as I heard them over and over again, back in Nepal as well as in India, these ascriptions of divine power continued to bother me, and I came back to them later as I strove to understand the relationship between research, ritual and politics in effecting recognition.

Perhaps the critique of “research” based on the “stories of elders” was not actually a critique of those elders or their stories themselves, but rather of the interpretive frameworks of researchers who, based on short-term encounters with the community, had taken such “stories” at face value and concluded that the Thangmi had only a degenerate, if any, culture. By sticking with the ethnographic project past the point at which others had decided that the Thangmi were “not

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<sup>42</sup> Original Nepali: *Tapai hamro deuta hunuhunchha; tapai hamro sunari ama hunuhunchha.*



worthy of future attention” (Northey and Morris 1928), I had demonstrated my commitment to Thangmi agendas, competing and contradictory though they might be. By appearing in the public domain alongside members of the Thangmi community repeatedly over a decade with all of the trappings of social scientific authority—notebook, video camera, university affiliation, research funding, and above all, perceived access to political decision-makers—I was demonstrating to outside others that the Thangmi must have some kind of culture worth recognizing.

It was in this sense that I became a recognizing agent—a catalyst who augmented Thangmi individuals’ sense of self-worth and the community’s visibility—and that the divine metaphor became comprehensible, if not entirely appropriate. For the Thangmi activists with whom I worked, “research” was in part a symbolic process that was not only about its empirical content, but also about its form as a mode of ritual action carried out in the public domain, the efficacious performance of which could yield pragmatic results from the higher-level recognizing agents of the state (and/or the organizations that stood in for it, i.e. I/NGOs, particularly in Nepal). In this formulation, I was not so much like a deity as a ritual specialist, believed to be capable of mediating between the human and divine, the citizen and his or her state(s).

At first I often tried to deny such powers—“I am just a student”, “No, I don’t have any powerful friends”, “No, I am not with any

‘project’, I am just a researcher”—but over time it became clear to me that this was disingenuous. The reality was that unlike most Thangmi, I could and did command immediate attention when I walked into government or organizational offices (or wrote a letter to the editor, made a phone call, or engaged in cocktail conversation) to make a point about pressing issues, be it in regard to a badly managed road project, an idea for economic development, or a hurtful misrepresentation of the Thangmi community. It was not just Thangmi individuals who believed that my work could have concrete effects; other ethnic activists, politicians and bureaucrats lauded me for conducting “research” which no one else could be bothered to do so that the Thangmi might have a chance at future advancement.

As one activist from a more prominent ethnic community told me at a NEFIN meeting, “Oh yes, the Thami are ‘highly marginalized’, which is why we don’t understand anything about them. Perhaps after you’ve done your research they can advance to ‘marginalized’”. In 2004, NEFIN had inaugurated a five-tier system for classifying ethnic groups as “advantaged”, “disadvantaged”, “marginalized”, “highly marginalized” and “endangered”, in which the Thangmi are currently listed in the “highly marginalized” category.<sup>43</sup> The patronizing undertone to this comment exemplified the less-than-welcoming reception I received from influential non-Thangmi ethnic activists in

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<sup>43</sup> See Gellner (2007), Hangen (2007) and Middleton and Shneiderman (2008) for further details of NEFIN’s classification system and its effects.

both Nepal and India; many such individuals eyed me cautiously, often evading private meetings and sharing information only reluctantly. Apparently they were concerned that my research and in-depth engagement with the Thangmi might give this low man on the ethnic totem pole too much direct access to powerful recognizing agents, perhaps allowing the Thangmi to circumvent the existing internal hierarchies of *janajati* and tribal politics. From Thangmi perspectives, this was precisely the power that engendered the divine analogy: just as a shaman takes on divine power through his unusual capacity to control it, my perceived capacity to cut through endless red tape and power politics to directly influence representatives of the state and other organizations bordered on the supernatural.

This is why, in the larger scheme of things, it didn't really matter if my written research presented the specific empirical conclusions that the activists wanted. They were more interested in my research as a form of efficacious action, and my role as an outside figure of academic authority—a recognizing agent—whose very attention to the social fact of “Thangmi culture” legitimized the results of their own research, which in the end were the ones that they wanted to promote in representations to the state, not mine.

In short, I, and social science as a whole, were useful as mediators between divine and political forms of recognition. It was not the case that Thangmi activists wanted to divest themselves entirely of their relationship with the territorial deities who had historically

provided them with a strong sense of recognition; rather they wanted to find new ways to reinterpret these relationships within the increasingly attractive terms of recognition provided by other recognizing agents, such as the states in which they lived. I could help in this process by presenting “data” about Thangmi history and culture—particularly about the special Thangmi relationship with territorial deities—as a total social fact which evidenced their “unique” identity to the powers that controlled state regimes of recognition. By telling me again and again that I was like a god, the Thangmi individuals with whom I worked ensured that I would feel obligated to act as such: if they acted in a ritually correct manner, by providing me access to all of the information I requested, then, like a deity who responds to rituals conducted according to the appropriate protocols, or like an ethnographer under the binding terms of an ethnographic contract, I was expected to deliver the goods. In a reversal of Malinowski’s classic argument for the value of fieldwork—which he claimed was important because only in that context does “the anthropologist have the myth-maker at his elbow” (1974 [1948]: 100)—in this case, the “myth-makers” had the anthropologist at their elbow, ready to parlay the partial truths they wanted to tell about themselves into a totality worthy of recognition by a larger set of listeners.

### *The Purpose of Social Science*

But isn't this kind of *fait accompli*—where informant and researcher complicitly help each other achieve their respective objectives without regard for the “truth”—frowned upon by social science? Should I have cast off the “divine” responsibility which weighed upon me heavily, opting out of the ethnographic contract by dismissing the statements of some sub-group of my Thangmi interlocutors (either gurus or activists, depending whose side I ultimately chose) as a bunch of hocus pocus that obscured my objective of describing Thangmi culture as it “truly” was?

According to Maurice Godelier, whose work provides the theoretical anchor for the next chapter of this dissertation, the function of the social sciences is “critically assessing the spontaneous beliefs and the illusions that societies and individuals hold about themselves, as well as evaluating the learned theories which do not take these beliefs seriously or do not account for them” (1999: 109). Indeed, I found that if I was genuinely interested in understanding what truth, research, identity, culture, ritual or recognition meant to “the Thangmi” in the most diverse yet holistic sense, I had to walk a zigzagging line that took me across state borders as well as across the borders between “beliefs and illusions” and “learned theories”, a wide and contradictory range of which were held by members of the community themselves. Often the boundary between these categories blurred, for instance when the “learned theories” of Thangmi activists

did not take the beliefs of their own gurus seriously, thereby becoming illusions that the activists held about themselves. All of these theories and beliefs were equally Thangmi, equally “indigenous”, which meant that I had more than the “dual loyalties to an organized group in struggle and to rigorous academic analysis” of which Charles Hale speaks (2006: 105). Rather, I had multiple loyalties to multiple members of an internally disparate group engaged in multiple struggles in multiple nation-states. Many of the individuals with whom I worked were invested in presenting to me a totalizing view of what Thangminess was, in a manner which often marginalized someone else’s equally totalizing view. My own totalizing view therefore had to become one which could recognize all of these competing totalities simultaneously.

Needless to say, I have found these tensions “highly productive” (Hale 2006: 105) in the moments when they have not been entirely overwhelming. Ultimately, these competing loyalties have impressed upon me the ethical imperative of listening to a diversity of voices within a putatively singular group, and recognizing all of the claims and counter-claims as equally part of the whole. Mary Des Chene has suggested that anthropologists working in what she calls Nepal’s *janajati yug*—“the era of ethnicity”—should:

... listen more, earlier, and longer. That is, they should listen with care to those they would know about, not only while “in the field”, but before, during and after devising research projects. They should listen not only to individuals from their specific

research site but to any member of a group, and to those in the wider society within which that group lives (1996: 101)

She then suggests that anthropologists should refrain from making broad, essentializing claims about the communities with whom they work. But what, then, if we make every effort to listen carefully, and the individuals with whom we work inform us that what they want is precisely such a holistic portrait of their community, despite the fact that they know such portrayals to be only partial truths? We must then listen to the reasons that they want this, and try to understand how, from the perspective of those we work with, social scientific research itself may be a form of identity-producing action that cannot be fully disentangled from the projects of recognition which it seeks to describe.

Acknowledging the complicit place of ethnography (and ethnographers) in the interplay between contemporary forms of recognition—political, divine, academic and beyond—and harnessing this complicity as a productive tool, paves the way for ethnographic work to contribute to larger transformations of the terms of recognition themselves. To a historically misrecognized group like the Thangmi, that is what research is for. For social scientists, as Marisol de la Cadena and Orin Starn have recently argued in their discussion of contemporary indigeneity, “a role for careful, engaged scholarship can be to contribute to understanding and activism that recognizes the paradoxes, limits and possibilities” (2007: 22) of indigenous projects

of recognition. Although this dissertation may fall far short of the mark, such intentions guide my writing here.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Framing, Practicing and Performing Thangmi Ethnicity**

Colorful banners around Gangtok advertised the event: “Tribal Folk Dances of Sikkim, presented in honor of Shri P.R. Kyndiah, Union Minister of Tribal Affairs”. It was November 2005, and each ethnic organization registered in India’s state of Sikkim, as well as the adjacent Darjeeling district of West Bengal, had been invited to perform a single “folk dance” that best demonstrated their “tribal culture”. I took the opportunity to accompany the Darjeeling-based Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association (BTWA) members, with whom I had been working, on the 4-hour jeep ride up to Gangtok for the occasion.

In the rehearsal session just before the actual performance, it became clear that the 50-odd dancers from 14 ethnic organizations were well aware of the politically charged environment in which they were performing. All of these groups were seeking recognition from the central Indian government as Scheduled Tribes (ST), and each group sought to capture the minister’s eye with a carefully framed performance which demonstrated the “tribal” nature of their identity in a single dance number. The rehearsing groups received advice in the form of stage directions from the director of Sikkim’s Department of Culture, who told them brusquely, “Shake your hips faster and make sure to flutter your eyelashes! Remember, if you look happy the audience will be happy. And if they are not happy, why should they

watch you? You must make them feel comfortable and familiar with your culture.”

The Thangmi performance troupe—which was comprised of a combination of young migrant workers from Nepal who spent several months at a time in India, and slightly older Thangmi from urban Darjeeling with professional dance experience—took the director of culture’s suggestions to heart in their performance of what the emcee introduced as a “Thami wedding dance”. The participation of the dancers from Nepal, who knew how to perform the slow, repetitive steps that characterize Thangmi cultural practice in village contexts, made the choreographers more confident about the efficacy of their performance. On the other hand, the choreographers from Darjeeling knew how to transform these plodding moves into complex Bollywood-style choreographed numbers that carried the weight of “culture” in the pan-Indian sense. The end result as danced for the minister [see Figure 2.1] bore very little resemblance to anything one would see at a Thangmi wedding or other ritual event [see Figure 2.2], but the performance was greeted with resounding applause.<sup>1</sup> Afterwards, the minister sent a message to the BTWA expressing his appreciation. The members of the group from India were pleased with the performance, and hopeful that it would serve as a catalyst in getting their Scheduled Tribe application approved quickly.

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<sup>1</sup> Other groups performing at the same event, such as the Ma(n)gar, did not have such carefully choreographed numbers, and were actually booed by the audience.



Figure 2.1 “Thangmi wedding dance” performed in Gangtok, Sikkim, India, November 2005



Figure 2.2 “Thangmi wedding dance” in Chokati, Sindhupalchok, Nepal, February 2008

Although they participated in the event with apparent enthusiasm, some of the members of the group from Nepal later told me that they felt uncomfortable with the way the choreographers—who were all from Darjeeling—had manipulated the cultural knowledge of those from Nepal by appropriating elements of ritual practice into an entirely different performance context. The dancers from Nepal found the experience unsettling for several reasons. First of all, the audience for which they were performing was not the assembly of deities propitiated through comparable elements of ritual action at home, but rather the representatives of a state in which they did not hold full citizenship. This difficulty could just about be overcome, since although such bureaucratic audiences might require different specific offerings than divine ones, the overall ritualized form of the event was similar. The larger problem was that the performers from Nepal themselves stood to gain little direct benefit from this transformation of practice into performance, since the Union Minister and his colleagues answered to the Indian state alone—Nepali citizens would not be eligible for any benefits that the Thangmi might gain in India if the Government of India recognized the group as a Scheduled Tribe. Finally, since the performers from Nepal were due to return home after the high labor season in Darjeeling, they might lose control over the future use of the elements of practice that they had contributed to the BTWA's repertoire, and they feared that by the time they returned the

following year, such performances might be transformed into something unrecognizable.

The Thangmi from Nepal were not outright opposed to the performatization of practice—a process akin to what Richard Handler (forthcoming) has called the “ritualization of ritual”, following Goffman (1971: 79)—in fact, I had seen several of them applaud heartily at a similarly staged performance of a “wedding dance” at a conference in Kathmandu, Nepal hosted by the Nepal Thami Society (NTS) earlier in the same year [see Figure 2.3].



Figure 2.3 “Thangmi wedding dance” performed at the Nepal Thami Society Second National Convention, Kathmandu, Nepal, May 2005

Rather, they felt that the political results had to be worth the phenomenological and ethical trade-offs that such transformation entailed. In other words, the objectification of culture was acceptable—even desirable—as long as it was done in the service of a specific goal, and as long as the resulting field of performance was recognized as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, the field of practice out of which it emerged. Once the dust had settled, the Gangtok experience prompted some of the initially uneasy performers from Nepal to consider how they might also deploy cultural performance to bolster newly emerging claims to the Nepali state about their rights to special benefits as members of a “highly marginalized” *janajati* group, claims which, if recognized, could help create the material conditions necessary to maintain the field of practice itself.

From the evidence presented in this chapter, it should be clear that Thangmi individuals from diverse backgrounds in both Nepal and India possess a high level of self-consciousness regarding the differences between fields of ritualized action—such as practice and performance—in which they engage, and that they intentionally choose to deploy different types of action within different social “frames” (Goffman 1974, Handler forthcoming) in order to achieve a range of results from diverse recognizing agents. I further suggest that in the Thangmi case, this self-consciousness emerges in part through the experience of moving regularly between multiple nation-states through circular migration. Familiarity with more than one national

“frame” within which ethnicity is conceptualized and recognized enables Thangmi—both at the individual and collective level—to see the framing machinery through which ethnicity is produced and reproduced in each context, and therefore to take self-conscious, agentive roles in employing appropriate framing devices for their own purposes. These purposes may range from assuaging territorial deities through private household propitiations to assuaging skeptical state representatives through public cultural performances, but ultimately all of the ritualized action so framed has a shared sacred referent—Thangmi ethnic identity itself.

In developing this argument, I draw particularly upon Erving Goffman’s work on the nature of “framing activity” (1974) and Maurice Godelier’s exposition of the sacred (1999), as well as Richard Handler’s discussions of “cultural objectification” (1984, forthcoming). Ultimately, I suggest that Thangmi ethnicity is a collective production, which synthesizes the disparate actions of individuals—who are often bound together by little more than name across nation-state, class, age, gender and other boundaries—into a coherent set of signifying practices and performances.

### *Defining Practice and Performance*

Here I define ‘practice’ and ‘performance’ in a specific manner which may diverge from other received definitions. As I see them, the two are qualitatively distinct, but inextricably linked and mutually influential

fields of “ritualized activity”, which I follow Catherine Bell in defining as, “a particular cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects and rooted in a distinctive interplay of a socialized body and the environment it structures” (1992: 8). I acknowledge at the outset that most practice has a performative aspect (cf. Austin 1975, Bauman and Briggs 1990, Butler 1997a), and almost all performance can be seen as a form of “practice” in Bourdieu’s sense (1977, 1990). Nonetheless, I want to draw a distinction between practice and performance, which I believe can be helpful at the analytical level as we try to understand the dynamics of consciousness and objectification inherent in the process of producing ethnicity. At the level of action, there is no question that the edges of these categories blur into one another. However, as I shall argue below, the analytical categories of practice and performance reflect those that Thangmi themselves use to describe these processes, which suggests that such distinctions are worth paying attention to.

In my discussion, “practice” refers to embodied, ritualized actions carried out by Thangmi individuals within an indigenous epistemological framework to achieve soteriological goals: to stop malevolent deities from plaguing one’s mind, for instance, or to guide a loved one’s soul to the realm of the ancestors. Practices, as I am specifying the term, are ritualized actions carried out “because we have always done them that way”. Their intended audiences are the syncretic pantheon of animistic, Hindu and Buddhist deities that comprise the



Thangmi divine world. Practices take place within the clearly delimited private domains of the household, or communal, but exclusively Thangmi, ethnic spaces. Practices, then, are the actions encapsulated in what Goffman calls “primary frameworks” (1974).

“Performances”, in the contrast I am drawing here, are framed “keyings”, or “transformations”, in Goffman’s terms, of the practices found within primary frameworks. Performances are ritualized actions carried out within a broader discursive context created by political, economic or other kinds of external agendas. They are mounted for the express consumption of non-Thangmi audiences, which may be comprised of representatives of the Nepali and/or Indian state—as at the Gangtok performance with which this chapter began—or members of other ethnic communities, (I)NGO representatives, and (at least imaginatively) endless others.<sup>2</sup> Performances take place in the open in public domains with the express purpose of demonstrating to both selves and others (of varying degrees) what practices are like.

Participation in both of these forms of ritualized action contributes to contemporary experiences of what culture, identity and ethnicity are for the actors who engage in them. I hope to avoid the

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<sup>2</sup> Many discussions of heritage focus on the commodification of local cultures for tourist consumption, tourists are not at present important interlocutors for the Thangmi. The Thangmi areas of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok are not on one of Nepal’s touristed trekking routes, and the decade-long civil conflict between Maoist insurgents and state forces between 1996–2006 has kept any prospective tourism development at bay. Far more important in Nepal are development workers—both Nepali and foreign—who visit the Thangmi area regularly. Although Darjeeling receives its fair share of tourists, the Thangmi community there has had little interest in engaging with them, preferring to focus their cultural performances on attracting representatives of the state.

pitfall of misrecognizing *either* practice or performance alone as the whole of culture, or at least as the sole signifier of cultural authenticity, as seems to happen often in academic, policy and popular contexts.<sup>3</sup> I argue that practice and performance, as I am defining them, are both essential aspects of contemporary cultural production, and as such are mutually constitutive. Neither can be substituted or subsumed by the other, and both are necessary for groups and individuals to maintain the pragmatic and emotional well-being that derives from a sense of belonging to a shared sacred identity that is recognized by others within the political context of individual nation-states, as well as within transnational environments shaped by cross-border movements and international discourses of indigeneity and heritage.

Arjun Guneratne's work with the Tharu of Nepal's Tarai provides a key ethnographic touchstone for discussing the dynamics of identity and consciousness in Nepal. Guneratne distinguishes between two "levels of group identity":

The first, implicit or unselfconscious, associated with the traditional, local, endogamous group ... In Bourdieu's terms, it exists as doxa or the unreflected upon and 'naturalized' process

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<sup>3</sup> Here, I use the term "authenticity" to represent a set of policy statements made by both the Indian and Nepali governments regarding the criteria they use to determine whether groups should be officially recognized as "tribal" or "marginalized" communities respectively; see Middleton and Shneiderman (2008) for details of these rubrics. Otherwise, I intentionally avoid using "authenticity" as a key concept, although the arguments made in this chapter clearly contribute to ongoing anthropological debates over this issue. Rather than using such an abstract, unquantifiable concept to define the reality or legitimacy of cultural productions, I focus instead on the multiple fields of action through which Thami individuals themselves produce the social world in which they live. For discussions of "authenticity" as a trope in identity politics and academic production, see Handler (1986), Linnekin (1991), and Briggs (1996).

of social reproduction of the community (Bourdieu 1977) ... The 'natural' character of social facts, hitherto accepted as part of the given order, become subject to critique when an objective crisis brings some aspect of doxa—identity—into question. This is a necessary precondition for the emergence of the second level of identity I wish to distinguish.

This second or more encompassing level of identity is a self-conscious ... and politically oriented identity that draws together various local communities and groups and endows them with an imagined coherence (cf. Anderson 1991). It is imagined in the sense that the structural linkages ... that help to shape the first level of group identity defined above do not exist at this level. (1998: 753).

Guneratne's two levels of identity are in many ways coterminous with the social fields produced by practice and performance as I define them. I extend Guneratne's insights further by suggesting that the two fields of identity co-exist and mutually constitute each other. In other words, rather than seeing the shift from one level of identity to another as a quintessentially modern transformation that moves in only one direction—from a state of "identity as doxa" to a state of "identity as political imagination", with the latter eventually eclipsing the former—I argue that both forms of identity are simultaneously present and influence each other in a multi-directional "feedback loop". This reality comes into focus when we turn our analytical gaze to the actions of practice and performance, rather than keeping it trained on the more static notion of identity itself. Practice and performance are mutually dependent aspects of the overall processes of cultural production and social reproduction, a relationship augmented, but not initiated, by the politics of recognition within modern nation-states. Take away practice

and there is no cultural content for performance to objectify, take away performance and there is no means for groups to demonstrate in a public forum their “existential presence”—a phrase I adapt from Laura Graham’s discussion of the indigenous need for “existential recognition” (2005)—as established via practice at the grassroots level.

To sum up the argument, then, practices and performances are distinguished by the types of discursive space in which they are enacted, the objectives with which they are mounted, the audiences for whom they are intended, and the respectively different types of results that they generate. To borrow from Sherry Ortner, we might say that practices “make” culture, while performances “construct” culture (1996: 1), yet these two domains are mutually dependent. Following Charles Briggs, we might also see performances as a type of “meta-discursive practice” (1996), which transforms absence into presence by objectifying for an external public the group-internal field of practice—which is already a form of objectified action, as I shall explain below—to create links with broader domains of action and discourse.<sup>4</sup>

### *Ethnicity as Synthetic Action*

Focusing on the interplay between practice and performance illuminates contemporary Thangmi ethnicity as a synthetic process in which these two fields of action, among others, play key roles. Approaching ethnicity as a synthesis of ritualized actions—here

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<sup>4</sup> Briggs draws upon Derrida’s (1976) arguments regarding absence and presence.

defined as action conducted in relation to a sacred object and intentionally aimed at securing one form of recognition or another—contributes to Felicia Hughes-Freeland and Mary Crain’s call for anthropologists to “consider identity less as being, and more in terms of doing” (1998: 15) by looking in detail at the relationship between processes of cultural production and those of social reproduction. In a similar vein, I build upon G. Carter Bentley’s practice theory of ethnicity by engaging in, “the investigation of a given case...broadened in time to show how ethnicity contributes to social reproduction, and in space to take account of regional and world-scale factors” (1987: 49). Indeed, the cross-border Thangmi case shows how practice and performance work together to create a “multi-dimensional habitus [in which] it is possible for an individual to possess several different situationally relevant but nonetheless emotionally authentic identities and to symbolize all of them in terms of shared descent” (Bentley 1987: 35).

Enacting simultaneous, multiple subjective states that are all affectively real requires a degree of self-consciousness and self-objectification on the part of the ethnic actors who practice and perform these identities. I argue that for many Thangmi, this consciousness emerges in the subjective space created by the repeated process of shifting frame between multiple nation-states as circular migrants. For those Thangmi who are settled in one location or another, contact with Thangmi circular migrants (whom, after all, share

the same name and system of descent) and their worldviews can effect different, but comparably intimate, shifts in frame. The self-consciousness engendered through these regular reframings is evident in the agentive manner in which individuals recognize the gap between practice and performance, and work to synthesize these disparate fields of action into a coherent identity that is both productive, in the affective sense of belonging, and constructive, in the political sense of rights (cf. Ortnner 1996). An action-based approach to ethnicity enables us to see how a wide range of different intentions and motivations held by as many individuals belonging to a putatively singular ethnic group can in fact work in concert to produce a multi-dimensional ethnic habitus, of which the recognition of intra-group difference is itself a key feature.<sup>5</sup>

### *Cross-Border Thangmi Relationships*

Sheela, the General Secretary of the Sikkim branch of the BTWA, explained the motivation behind the performatization of Thangmi practice that I witnessed in Gangtok: “Thami rituals and traditions are so slow and repetitive. That’s OK back in the *pahar* (N), but here we need something different when we show our culture to others so that the government will notice us.” Her statement sums up the differences between the contemporary Thangmi communities in Nepal and India as

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<sup>5</sup> Although I build upon Bourdieu’s work in particular and practice theory in general, I avoid aligning my approach too closely with Bentley’s “practice theory of ethnicity” because I want to reserve the word “practice” to describe only one component of the range of actions entailed in the production of ethnicity.

Sheela saw them. The former group, whom Sheela stereotyped as residing in the *pahar*—a Nepali language term, literally meaning “the hills”, but used pejoratively to contrast rural Nepal to relatively urban Darjeeling— for the most part continue to speak their own language and participate in ritual practices at which Thangmi gurus are the primary officiants.<sup>6</sup> With rare exceptions, the latter group has historically not spoken the Thangmi language or employed Thangmi gurus as ritual practitioners in their own daily lives—born and raised in India in the post-Independence era, their parents sought to assimilate to a pan-Nepali identity, within which ethnic languages and practices were intentionally jettisoned.

Throughout the *longue durée* of their efforts to gain first Other Backwards Class (OBC) and then Scheduled Tribe (ST) status from the Indian state (described in detail in Chapter 5), one of the primary ways in which the Thangmi community in India felt they could legitimize their claim to being a “tribal” group was to mount cultural performances in public domains. Clearly, they were not misguided, since in spring 2006, some months after the Gangtok performance for the Minister of Tribal Affairs which I observed, similar performances were commissioned by the Cultural Research Institute (CRI), the West Bengal state agency charged with verifying the authenticity of each ST

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<sup>6</sup> See Hutt (1998) for a discussion of the term *pahar* in literary representations of migration from Nepal to India.

applicant group.<sup>7</sup> The performance committee of the BTWA also presents a set of dances as part of the commercial Darjeeling Carnival every year; although not explicitly for government consumption, the carnival gives them an opportunity to put their identity on display before the general public, hopefully garnering popular support for their political goals.

As described in Chapter 1, Thangmi everywhere are bound together by a shared sense of Thangminess, which is marked primarily, although not exclusively, by their shared name. Shaped by often disparate life experiences in different nation-states, Thangmi from Nepal and India are by turns curious and critical of each other's ways of being Thangmi, and would probably never meet but for the fact that Thangmi livelihoods are defined by the ongoing process of circular migration (see Chapter 4). Almost every Thangmi household in Nepal has one or more members who spend three to six months of the year in India doing seasonal wage labor. These migrant workers carry cultural knowledge, as well as political consciousness and awareness of state policies—what Peggy Levitt (2001) has called “social remittances”—back and forth with them as they travel between Nepal and India. The Thangmi case differs somewhat from the Dominican case that Levitt discusses, in that she suggests that social remittances flow in only one direction—from place of migration back to place of

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<sup>7</sup> At the time of writing in May 2008, the Thangmi ST application was still pending, with no clear resolution in sight. Thanks to Townsend Middleton for information about the CRI verification process.



origin—while I wish to suggest that ideas and information flow in both directions as part of the feedback loop created by regular circular migration.

More recently, members of the BTWA have consciously sought to develop relationships with Thangmi migrant laborers from Nepal, asking them to demonstrate Thangmi cultural practice—in ritual, song and dance—and in some cases even following them back to Nepal to find the “source” of “original Thangmi culture” (these are all phrases commonly used in English) for the purposes of including descriptions of it in their ST application. Migrant workers also carry back to Nepal with them publications, cassettes, and videos that contain renditions of performances staged by the BTWA in Darjeeling. Many of these have become popular viewing in Nepal as electricity—and therefore TVs, cassette and VCD decks—has spread rapidly throughout many Thangmi villages over the last few years. It is in such encounters that practice and performance come to articulate with, and mutually influence, each other in the overall process of Thangmi identity production.

### *Framing Cross-Border Subjectivities*

It is easy to reify the unit of the nation-state itself, as well as “other kinds of groups that spring up in the wake of or in resistance to the nation-state”, as primordial “individuals—writ-large ... imagined to ‘possess’ cultural properties that define their personalities and

legitimate their right to exist” (Handler forthcoming). Within anthropological literature, the modern nation–state has been widely recognized as the primary structure shaping processes of ethnicization (Williams 1989; Verdery 1994; and Harrell 2002; as well as Levine 1987; Holmberg 1989; Gellner, Pfaff–Czarnecka and Whelpton 1997; Fisher 2001 and Guneratne 2002 regarding Nepal in particular). But does this assessment match with the subjective perceptions of those who experience ethnicization? Although nation–states may certainly be viewed as “individuals–writ–large” by people who live firmly within their borders and whose subjectivity is, in a singular manner, defined by such a nationalist ethos, the views of border peoples whose subjectivities have long been defined by interactions with multiple states may be markedly different.<sup>8</sup> In the Thangmi context, I argue that the long duration of cross–border circular migration and the concomitant in–depth experience of multiple frameworks for defining national and ethnic identities leads to a different view, in which single nation–states are not fixed, self–standing structures which determine the rules of ethnicity, but are rather one of many flexible frames within which ethnic identity may be produced. The cross–border Thangmi experience suggests how nation–states may be seen as flexible identity–*framing* devices, in relation to which individuals and collectivities produce meaningful cultural content in each context,

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<sup>8</sup> My use of the terms “border people” and “cross–border community” derive from Wilson and Donnan’s (1998) reframing of what they call the “border concept” in pragmatic ethnographic terms.

rather than absolute identity–*determining* structures, which in themselves dictate that content.

This argument leads to an inversion of nationalist perspectives in which “the group is imagined as an individual” with a homogeneous identity (Handler forthcoming). Instead, in the cross-border Thangmi situation, collective identity cannot exist without the manifold contributions of heterogeneous individuals, each of whom possesses complementary elements of the overall repertoire of ritualized action required to establish the existential presence of the group within multiple state frames. From the perspectives of those who comprise it, the group is not imagined as a coherent “individual”, but rather is readily acknowledged as the product of disparate life experiences embodied by multiple individuals in as many locations. As Surbir, a long-term Darjeeling resident originally from Nepal put it, “We Thangmi are like the beads of a broken necklace that have been scattered all over the place. And now it’s time to find them and put them back together again.” Surbir’s statement shows that this sense of fragmentation is not necessarily the desired state of affairs, and many Thangmi ethno-activist agendas focus on synthesizing disparate Thangmi practices into a coherent whole. The Nepal Thami Samaj Second National Convention Report, for instance, echoes Surbir’s metaphor with the assertion that the Convention’s main objective was, “to integrate the Thamis living in various places ... to make [our] demands and fundamental identity widespread, and to string together

all the Thamis” (NTS 2005: 4).<sup>9</sup> Yet the reality remains that it is the self-consciousness of this process of mixture itself, the ongoing synthesis of disparate experiences, beliefs and ideologies, all held together under the name “Thangmi”, as well as “Thami”, which defines collective identity at the most fundamental level.

Viewing ethnicity as a collective project, to which individuals may make varying contributions in a laterally differentiated manner, rather than as a vertically homogenous “individual” which requires group members to articulate belonging in more or less similar ways, diminishes the need to wrestle divergent experiences into neat arguments about group solidarity or singular authenticity. I suggest that the quality of “we-feeling”, which, for instance, the Nepal Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities Act in Nepal (NFDIN 2003: 7) lists as one of the defining criteria for membership as an Indigenous People’s Organization (IPO), may actually be produced through the interactions and communication *among* members of individual groups, across boundaries of class, gender, and, perhaps most importantly in the Thangmi context, nation.

Mahendra, a Thangmi artist well-known in Darjeeling, explained his views on the collective production of Thangminess with an analogy: I am an artist, so many people who meet me who have never met a Thangmi before think that all Thangmi are artists. Actually, they should think instead, ‘If a Thangmi can be an artist, then there must also be Thangmi writers, cooks, football players, dancers and everything else’. In this manner, each Thangmi should be Thangmi in his own way.

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<sup>9</sup> This convention is described in detail in Chapter 5.

This perspective brings into focus the manner in which multiple fields of action, such as practice and performance, each of which entail different processes of objectification (which I will detail below) intended for different audiences, can comprise complementary aspects of the overall cross-border social field in which ethnicity is produced.

In the course of conceptualizing ethnicity as a collective process enacted through a diverse set of ritualized actions across multiple state borders, this argument demands a nuanced analysis of the effects of global discourses like indigeneity and heritage, and a concomitantly rigorous use of the concept of transnationalism.<sup>10</sup> While there is no doubt that such concepts exist at the level of international policy, promoted in particular by UN agencies like the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples and UNESCO respectively, these terms do not necessarily mean the same thing—or anything at all, in some cases—to people on the ground in various local contexts. The ways in which such concepts are introduced and received by communities in different locations has a great deal to do with the specific ways in which individual nation-states accept, reject, or otherwise filter such global discourses within their own borders.

For instance, the Government of India rejects the English “indigenous” as an operative term in its minority legislation, preferring to maintain the colonial “tribal”—and therefore has refused to ratify

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<sup>10</sup> Anna Tsing’s *Friction* (2005) explores these global-national-local relationships effectively in the domain of environmental discourse in Indonesia; I am suggesting the need for something similar regarding the discourses of indigeneity and heritage in specific sites the world over.

international instruments like the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169 on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>11</sup> In addition, India keeps close tabs on international organizations that it allows to work within its borders, with the Indian state itself providing the majority of economic and cultural support to minority groups. By contrast, Nepal was one of the first Asian countries (second only to the Philippines) to ratify the ILO Convention and integrate the term “indigenous” into its official language, and, as a relatively weak state, it allows a range of international organizations to provide targeted development aid to marginalized groups. These national differences in accepting and implementing the prerogatives of global discourse as propagated by international actors have substantial effects on the manner in which groups like the Thangmi envision their own ethnic identity within each state (this argument will be developed further in Chapter 6).

In short, globalization theory has often overplayed the extent to which Western-influenced ideologies—global discourses—dominate local discourse and practice, leading to analytical models which de-emphasize the ongoing power of individual nation-states to imbue identity production with locally specific meanings. In addition, many theorists (Appadurai 1990; Basch, Schiller and Blanc 1994; Inda and Rosaldo 2002) have suggested that nations become deterritorialized due to constant border-crossing movements including labor migration,

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/english/convdisp1.htm>, accessed 27 May 2008.

conflict-induced displacement, and cosmopolitan jet-setting, with the result that transnational frameworks eventually supersede national ones in shaping identities. Contrary to such assumptions, the Thangmi case shows how transnational life experiences in fact bring into sharp focus the specific properties of individual national frameworks, rather than effacing them.

I argue that nation-states remain crucial framing devices in the production of ethnicity, but that these framing machineries are now rarely experienced in isolation, and that they are therefore not taken for granted. Instead, nation-states are experienced as multiple but simultaneously existing frames, which become visible in the process of switching between them. Each such frame demands and facilitates different forms of ritualized action, manifested in different contexts to produce recognizable identities. In this formulation, nation-states continue to exercise sovereignty in very real ways, often in manners that attempt to obscure intentionally the locus of their power by casting themselves as magical (cf. Coronil 1997) or all-knowing (Scott 1998). But these state tactics cannot become entirely hegemonic in a mobile world where cross-border experiences are increasingly common; anyone who moves across borders on a regular basis knows that sovereignties do not exist in individual, reified isolation. Instead, for people accustomed to dealing with multiple states, the role of nation-states as framing devices becomes evident, at the same time that their previously presumed absolute power becomes relative.

Nonetheless, the ability to control such frameworks in order to produce the desired effects within them is a complicated craft, which requires great care and ritualized attention to the nuances of practice and performance in order to be successful.

*Recognizing the Sacred: On Consciousness and Objectification*

The distinction that I am drawing between practice and performance may appear to be academic, but it also has an indigenous ontological reality. Members of the Thangmi community in both Nepal and India differentiate between the aims and efficacy of a practice carried out within Thangmi company for a divine audience, and a performance carried out in a public environment for broader political purposes. To distinguish between the two types of action, Thangmi use the Nepali terms *sakali* and *nakali*, which respectively translate as “real, true, original” (Turner 1997 [1931]: 578) and “copy, imitation” (Turner 1997 [1931]: 333) to describe practices and performances respectively. These are Nepali, not Thangmi, words, and are also used by Nepali speakers of other ethnic groups. Thangmi speakers regularly insert these Nepali terms into otherwise Thangmi discourse, as they do with all sorts of other loan words. I do not suggest that the way in which Thangmi use these terms is unique, but I do think that these terms articulate particularly well with the sensibility shared by many Thangmi which recognizes the differences between, but complementary nature of, these two domains. Thangmi individuals talk about how one must



get carefully dressed and made-up, *nakal parnu parchha*—literally “it is necessary to copy or imitate”—in order to mount successful performances, while practices require no such costuming.

While viewing video that I had shot of Thangmi cultural performances in Darjeeling, several audience members at a program in Kathmandu organized by the Nepal Thami Samaj shouted out comments like, “Oh, how nicely they have dressed up [literally “imitated”]! They look really great!”<sup>12</sup> After the video viewing, one elderly man commented to me, “That *nakali* dance works well to show Thangmi culture, but it’s a bit different from the *sakali*.”<sup>13</sup> From his perspective, like that of many Thangmi, *nakali* is not necessarily a negative quality in the sense that we might impute from the dictionary definition of “copy, imitation”.<sup>14</sup> Rather, it can be a positive and efficacious quality, which in its very difference from the *sakali* enables an alternative set of objectives to be realized. Through their ostentative capacity to “show” and make visible “Thangmi culture” to audiences beyond group members and their deities, *nakali* performances do something that *sakali* practices can not; yet the *nakali* cannot exist without constantly referring to and objectifying the *sakali*.

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<sup>12</sup> Original Nepali: *O ho, kasto ramro nakal pareko! Ekdam ramro dekhinchha!* I have long used digital video as an ethnographic methodology; in this case, I used it to show members of the Thangmi community in one location what practices and performances in other locations look like.

<sup>13</sup> Original Nepali: *Tyo nakali nach Thangmi sanskriti dekhaunlai ramrai kam lagchha, tara sakali banda ali pharak chha.*

<sup>14</sup> It also has a differently negative connotation in Nepali youth slang, in which the term *nakali* may be used as a noun to describe a heavily made-up woman in a pejorative manner. I am grateful to Anna Stirr for this information. This usage of the term was not common among Thangmi I worked with.

The difference between *sakali* and *nakali* not only glosses the distinction between practice and performance well, but these were precisely the constructs offered by Thangmi interlocutors that compelled me to appreciate the different techniques of objectification that each form of ritualized action entails. At some level, every expressive action, every ritual, is fundamentally an act of objectification—the simultaneous process of both making visible in social space deeply held worldviews and beliefs, and producing those worldviews through ritualized action. In the quintessential Durkheimian sense, rituals are “the rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of...sacred objects” (1995 [1912]: 56). As a set of rules enacted in the public sphere, rituals are by nature objectified forms of social action which articulate human relationships to the sacred.

My argument therefore is not that practice—the *sakali*—is somehow unobjectified, raw, or pure *doxa* which is lost in the process of objectification that creating the *nakali* entails, but rather that the techniques and intentions of objectification operative in the *sakali* field of practice are different from those operative in the *nakali* field of performance. To put it in Goffman’s terms, primary frameworks are still frameworks. *Nakali* performance objectifies in a new and differently efficacious manner the already objectified *sakali* field of practice. Gurus conducting private family ritual practices objectify the set of rules that governs their relationship with territorial deities, while

Thangmi youth who perform a staged rendition of such shamanic practice to a pop music soundtrack re-objectify the gurus' practice in order to themselves objectify the rules that govern their relationship with the Indian state.

In other words, each field of action entails intentionally different strategies of ritualization, implemented with the help of different framing devices (of which the nation-state is one) in order to make claims upon different community-external entities that will yield different results. Yet one field of action does not efface the other, rather, *sakali* practice and *nakali* performance both continue to exist simultaneously and mutually influence each other, and individual Thangmi may employ one, the other, or both in making their own contributions to the collective production of ethnicity. The types of action(s) that individuals choose depend on their experiences and citizenship status in one, the other, or both nation-states; their age; their gender; their economic and educational status; and other idiosyncrasies of their life history and personal outlook.

The constant that links these disparate forms of action together is the enduring presence of the "sacred object" of ritual attention which requires that certain rules of conduct be set out in ritualized form. A more nuanced discussion of what, in fact, the "sacred object" is, in the context of Thangmi practices and performances, is required here. Handler follows Durkheim closely by suggesting that the sacred object of heritage performances may be the "social self" (forthcoming). I take

this notion a step further by suggesting that in the Thangmi case (and perhaps others), the sacred object is identity itself. Ethnicity, then, is one set of “rules of conduct” which govern behavior in the presence of this sacred object—a synthetic set of ritualized actions produced by disparate members of the collectivity, which taken together objectify the inalienable but intangible sacred in a manner simultaneously recognizable to insiders and outsiders. Chapter 3 substantiates this supposition with additional ethnographic description; here I explore its theoretical implications.

This argument emerges from my reading of Maurice Godelier’s exposition of the sacred:

For the sacred—contrary to the views of Durkheim, who made too stark a separation between religious and political—always has to do with power insofar as the sacred is a certain kind of relationship with the origin, and insofar as the origin of individuals and of groups has a bearing on the places they occupy in a social and cosmic order. It is with reference to the origin of each person and each group that the actual relations between the individuals and the groups which compose a society are compared with the order that should be reigning in the universe and in society. The actual state is then judged to be legitimate or illegitimate, by right, and therefore acceptable or unacceptable. It is therefore not objects which sacralize some or all of people’s relations with each other and with the surrounding universe, it is the converse. (1999: 169)

I take Godelier to mean that people’s relations with each other across a collectivity—as enacted in moments of practice and performance—objectify as sacred human connections with their origins, and their concomitant position in social, political and cosmic orders. This sacred combination of confidence in the knowledge of one’s origins, *and*

positionality vis-à-vis contemporary states, is ethnic identity itself, and it is produced through a range of diverse but simultaneously existing fields of action maintained by the disparate individuals who comprise the collective (see Chapter 3).<sup>15</sup>

### *Creating Sacred Objects*

In Godelier's terms, sacred objects are those which cannot be exchanged (as gifts or commodities), "cannot be alienated", and which give people "an identity and root this identity in the Beginning" (1999: 120–121). For the Baruya, whose society provides the content upon which Godelier builds his theory, sacred objects are in fact tangible objects as such. These objects act as an inalienable extension of the human body itself in their ability to simultaneously contain and represent identity. In the Thangmi case, however, such tangible sacred objects have historically been almost non-existent. As mentioned in Chapter 1, there is no easily discernable Thangmi material culture which might be objectified as sacred. In the absence of tangible signifying items, identity must serve as its own sacred object. This is why the objectifying actions of both practice and performance are so important for the Thangmi; identity itself must be objectified as sacred and presented to the powers-that-be—whether representatives of the

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<sup>15</sup> Chapter 3 explores in depth the relationships between "origin myths" and "myths of originality".

divine or the state—since there is little else in the material world that can stand in for it.

The lack of distinctive material culture is one of the most noticeable features of Thangmi life, and is universally noted by the few previous researchers who have engaged with the Thangmi (Fürer-Haimendorf [in 1974 field diaries] as cited in Shneiderman and Turin 2006, Peet 1978, Stein personal communication).<sup>16</sup> Precisely because there is nothing to notice in a Thangmi village aside from generic features of rural life in hill Nepal, this absence of material culture has contributed substantially to the problems of recognition that the Thangmi now face at the political level in Nepal and India. Moreover, as described in Chapter 1, Thangmi in Nepal for generations intentionally retreated from the gaze of the state rather than engaging with it, and the Thangmi ethnonym remains largely vacuous of signifying meaning to anyone but Thangmi themselves.

There is, in fact, an enormous amount of Thangmi cultural content, but it is all contained in the intangible aspects of practice that are not immediately visible to an outside eye: origin myths (described in Chapter 3); propitiation chants to pacify territorial deities (described in Chapter 6); the memorial process of reconstructing the body of the deceased out of every day foodstuff (described in Chapter 7). Present to those who practice it, but absent to outside observers, Thangmi

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<sup>16</sup> The other consistently noted Thangmi cultural feature is a system of parallel descent, in which men and women have their own clans. See Chapter 7 for details.

identity is indeed a sacred object in Godelier's sense, "gorged with signification ... in which man is both present and absent" (1999: 175).

The only notable exceptions to the generally true statement that the Thangmi have no unique material culture are the guru's implements of drum (T: *take*) and wooden dagger (T: *thurmi*). However, these are both pan-Himalayan shamanic implements also used by other groups across the region, and as such have little sacred power as identity-signifying objects per se. They only become sacred when used in the specific context of Thangmi language ritual practice by Thangmi guru to marshal the power of exclusively Thangmi territorial deities. But as soon as such rituals are over, the *take* and *thurmi* become generic objects, not particularly Thangmi, or particularly sacred. In order to work, *take* and *thurmi* must be used by a guru who received these ritual implements from his own father, or otherwise his own shamanic teacher, suggesting that in the appropriate context, such objects may also work as signifiers of shared descent—but not in an abstractable manner beyond the guru's lineage itself.

This is why the BTWA's use of a *thurmi* image for their logo, along with the more complex diagram of one submitted as part of their ST application [see Figures 2.4 and 2.5], are viewed as *nakali* uses of the object by guru who use such items in ritual practice. Recall, however, that *nakali* is not necessarily a negative attribute—rather, it implies the re-objectification of the *sakali* in a new context for a

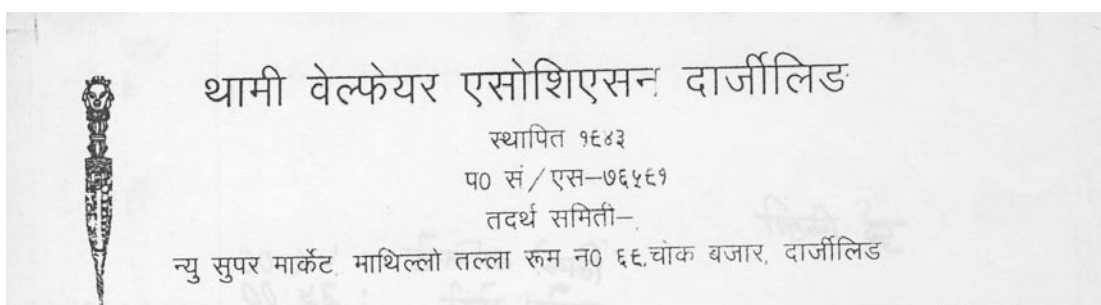


Figure 2.4 Letterhead of the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association

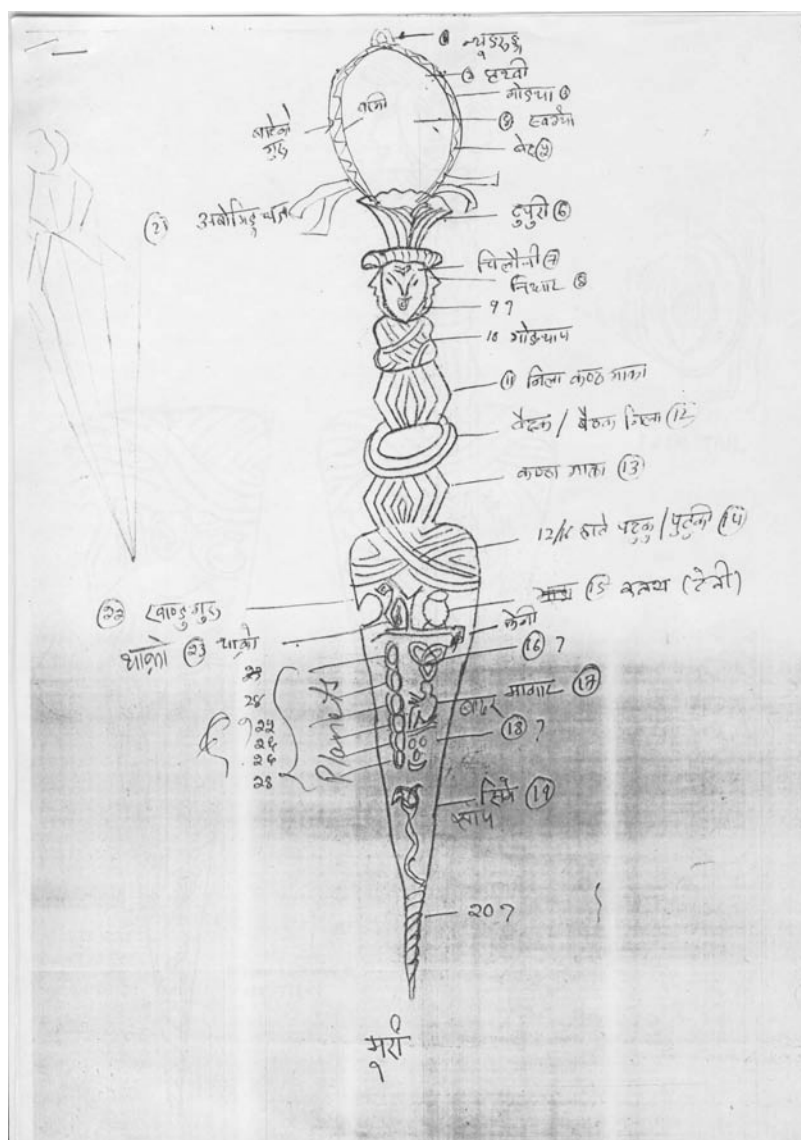


Figure 2.5 Diagram of a *thurmi* submitted with the Thangmi Scheduled Tribe application in India



different purpose. As Latte Apa, Darjeeling's senior Thangmi guru, put it:

I always think it's strange when I see the *thurmi* on the BTWA certificates. It is not a 'real' *thurmi*. But then I think, the government doesn't know us yet, but we must make them know us. If they see the *thurmi*, they will know, "That is Thangmi".

Such statements show how the sacred object of Thangmi identity remains constant, although it may be objectified in a diverse range of *sakali* and *nakali* manners. The *nakali* use of the *thurmi* as a logo for the Thangmi ethnic organization does not efface its continued *sakali* use by Latte Apa in ritual practice; he acknowledges the value of the former yet continues with the latter. The audiences who reaffirm the sacrality of the *thurmi* in each context may be different, but each plays a comparable and equally necessary role.

Along these lines, Godelier tells us that:

Objects do not need to be different in order to operate in different areas ... It is not the object which creates the differences, it is the different logics governing the areas of social life that endow it with different meanings as it moves from one domain to the other, changing functions and uses as it goes (1999: 108).

Practices ensure that deities come to know the Thangmi and validate their special relationship with territorial deities, whereas performances—the full range of *nakali* strategies of representation—ensure that state officials and other outsiders come to know the Thangmi as a community worthy of recognition. The mechanisms of recognition are different, but both realms of ritualized action serve to regulate key areas of the social world in which the sacred object of

Thangmi identity is reproduced. This is why someone like Latte Apa, for instance, may be both a practitioner and a performer without a sense of internal contradiction: the sacred object which is the focus of ritualized activity does not change, and both fields of ritualized action reaffirm its primacy.

### *Recognition and Self-Consciousness*

A concern with the issue of “recognition” runs throughout Godelier’s discussion of the sacred. He asks, “to what extent do humans not recognize themselves in their replicas? To what extent do they believe in their beliefs ...?” (1999: 178), and soon answers, “To be sure he can *see himself* in these sacred objects because he knows the *code*, but he cannot *recognize* himself in them, cannot recognize himself as their author and maker, in short as their origin” (1999: 178–179, italics in the original). Although Godelier accords his subjects the power to *see* themselves, he stops short of granting them the ability *recognize* themselves, therefore suggesting that ritual behavior can not be fully self-conscious. Handler similarly hedges his bets, suggesting first that actors have a certain level of self-consciousness: “Audiences, too, will have differing kinds of awareness of the frame and the contents of heritage rituals. And of course, both actors and audiences will be more or less aware of each others’ interpretations of such issues” (forthcoming). Soon after, however, Handler returns to a more classical Durkheimian position by suggesting that, “modern social groups

worship at the altar of their own identity, but they do not consciously realize that the idea of identity itself, like the idea of god, is a social production” (forthcoming).

Such arguments allude to larger anthropological debates over authenticity and the role of objectification in constituting the modern “culture concept”. Crediting Cohn (1987), Handler defines “cultural objectification” as a quintessentially modern process which is “the imaginative embodiment of human realities in terms of a theoretical discourse based on the concept of culture” (1984: 56). Along with this argument comes the assumption that engaging in the process of objectification somehow removes one from the realm of pure, un-self-conscious, and by implication, non-modern culture. Recall also Guneratne’s separation of Tharu identity into two distinct domains—that of un-selfconscious *doxa* versus that of self-conscious political posturing—a formulation which draws upon Bourdieu’s dichotomous separation of the fields of “practice” and “theory” and their respective identification with worlds of the “native” and the “analyst” (1990).

These arguments entail two paradoxes regarding the self-consciousness (or lack thereof) of cultural actors. First: on the one hand, those who do not engage in objectification—“natives” in whose world “rites take place because ... they cannot afford the luxury of logical speculation” as Bourdieu puts it (1990: 96), or non-modern actors in Handler’s terms—do not see the frames within which their social world are produced, instead taking “identity” and “culture” for

granted as absolute, sacred realities without self-consciously recognizing themselves as the authors of these phenomenon. On the other hand, those who do engage in objectification—analysts and modern cultural actors—may be able to see the frames within which social reality and identity are produced, yet they still perceive the resulting cultural objects as real and sacred, without self-consciously recognizing the role of their own actions in reifying the frames within which such objects are created.

Second: any sign of consciousness in the manipulation of cultural forms on the part of cultural actors is portrayed negatively as a fall from non-objectified, genuine grace (such as the “calculating, interested, manipulated belief” that comprises acts of “bad faith” in Godelier’s words [1999: 178]); while at the same time, consciousness on the part of those who attempt to identify instances of such manipulation is seen as positive evidence of social science at work.

There are two problems with such arguments. First of all, they assume that there is a moment of rupture, an “epistemological break” (Bentley 1987: 44, citing Foucault 1977), at which social groups (conceived of as coherent, homogeneous individuals) make the transition, never to return, from non-objectified to objectified cultural action, from identity as *doxa* to identity as politics, from practice (in Bourdieu’s sense of the word, not mine) to theory. Take Guneratne’s description of the Tharu’s transition between these two domains as an example of this type of argument:

While the cultural practices of their elders become in one sense marginal to their everyday concerns, in another sense they undergo a reification and reappear as an essential aspect of their modern identity. It is no longer culture as *doxa* in Bourdieu's sense but culture as performance, a tale that Tharus tell themselves about themselves (1998: 760)

Second of all, regardless of how and when that moment of rupture occurs, individuals are not portrayed as gaining genuine self-consciousness through that transition; rather, they simply move from a state in which they lack self-consciousness entirely, to a state in which total belief in their analytical capacities (belief in the power of objectification inherent in the modern culture concept) obscures their real inability to comprehend their contributions to the production of sacred objects like identity. In Handler's view:

People believe that they are discovering what their culture has been and is. They assume that culture is a real-world entity and that by analyzing its objective properties they can preserve it. But, as I see it, they are neither documenting nor preserving a culture which exists independently of them (1984: 62)

I would like to revisit this set of assumptions by first asserting that the dividing lines between the types of actors discussed above (modern/non-modern; native/analyst) be questioned, since all of them in fact engage in processes of objectification; second, by suggesting that all such actors (rather than none of them), do act with a substantial level of self-consciousness; and finally, by arguing that there is no moment of rupture when groups shift from one form of objectification to another. I propose instead that multiple forms of objectifying action, each with different intended audiences and effects,

are employed simultaneously by a range of individuals in the production of sets of social rules, like ethnicity, within which identity itself becomes a sacred object. By refocusing on the entire range of things that individuals belonging to a collectivity (defined by name and the associated implication of shared descent) actually *do* to objectify various parts of their social world, and the ways in which these multiple fields of ritualized action, such as practice and performance, co-exist and inform each other, we can see that culture as *doxa*, or practice, does not necessarily give rise, in a unidirectional, evolutionary manner, to culture as performance.

This argument revisits some of the territory covered by the debates over change versus continuity, tradition versus modernity, that have dominated much anthropological work on questions of cultural objectification and authenticity. Rather than focusing on cultural objects themselves, foregrounding instead the diverse forms of sacralizing action which people use to produce their cultural world, and the constantly shifting interplay between such forms—which are not inherently attached to specific chronological conjunctures or evolutionary phases—helps move beyond such limiting dichotomies. Furthermore, acknowledging that there is a range of simultaneously available objectifying actions which people may employ to express their relationship with the sacred object of identity allows us to see that there is a substantial scope for choice—and therefore self-consciousness—in the decisions that people make about which forms

of action to employ in which circumstances, and thus come to recognize themselves as creators of their own social world.

I am not suggesting that people make fully rational, strategic choices about how they represent their identity for purely expedient political and economic reasons. Rather, actors are conscious of, and make choices between, various forms of action which articulate different aspects of their relationship with the sacred—in the Thangmi case, identity itself—to different but equally important audiences. Each form of action occasions recognition from a public larger than the individual or the ethnic collectivity itself, whether that be the divine world or the state, and that experience of recognition leads to a powerful affective experience of affirmation of the social self. For some, this strong experience of validation might come from material evidence that the divine exists and has a special relationship with their people: natural wonders, deities speaking in tongues through possessed shamans, or other “miracles”. For others, affirmation might come from evidence that the government notices and has a special relationship with their people: constitutional provisions for special treatment, political and educational quotas, or other such policies. The objectifying actions necessary to secure each form of recognition and its evidence are different, but the affective results are comparable. For most contemporary Thangmi, a subjectively complete sense of recognition comes from a combination of both types of recognition in

different doses, depending upon individual history and personal proclivity.

The desire to gain either one or both of these forms of “existential recognition” (Graham 2005)—cannot exist without a minimum sense of self-recognition as a legitimate subject for recognition from others. That basic level of self-consciousness, and the ensuing confidence that external recognition will at some point be forthcoming, is the necessary impetus for individuals to undertake the often expensive, as well as mentally and physically arduous, ritual tasks of propitiating deities (multi-day Thangmi rituals often require participants to go without sleep for close to a week) or submitting government applications (a process which often takes years, several visits to government offices, and a great deal of personal expense). Indeed,

It is because men know that they might not be heard, and that their wishes and desires might not be answered, that they are often very strict about the performance of their rites. If beings in the invisible world are to consent to interrupt what they are doing and lend an ear to the plea of men, these must be formulated in a language and according to procedures that are understandable and appropriate. (Godelier 1999: 186)

Without a minimum level of self-consciousness and confidence, the challenges of securing recognition from such beings would be insurmountable. Even if such obstacles are overcome, the relatively small pragmatic benefits would not in themselves be worth such heroic efforts without the concomitant psychological benefits of “existential recognition”.



*On the Politics of Heritage and Cross-Border Frames*

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has argued that in the performance of heritage, “people become living signs of themselves” (1998: 18). This statement resonates with Godelier’s assertions that through ritual activity:

People generate duplicate selves ... which, once they have split off, stand before them as persons who are at once familiar and alien. In reality these are not duplicates which stand before them as aliens; these are the people themselves who, by splitting, have become in part strangers to themselves, subjected, alienated to these other beings who are nonetheless part of themselves. (1999: 169–170)

Although Godelier’s “duplicate selves” are supernatural beings, while Kirshenblatt-Gimblett refers to human performers, the underlying idea is similar. In the process of engaging in ritualized action, people objectify their own self-consciousness—in a sense alienating themselves from themselves—but at the same time, through such self-replicating, signifying action, they create the potential for a reflective awareness through which they can make sense of these processes of subjectification and alienation in a manner that allows the “double selves” to stand without contradiction. In the end, the sacred self is inalienable. Through the process of performance, the experience of becoming “a living sign”, who is recognized as such by powerful others, and/or watching other members of one’s community become one—as many Thangmi are now doing—generates a consciousness of the different objectifying tools of practice and performance, and their different, but equally important, efficacies. In a diverse cross-border

community shaped by the historical experience of circular migration between multiple nation-states, such consciousness emerges in part from intimate knowledge of the differences in paradigms for cultural objectification in each country, and the ability to see such national ethos as frames within which one's own action unfolds.

During a ritual to protect a Darjeeling household from bad luck, Rana Bahadur (no relation to the senior guru Rana Bahadur), a young Thangmi from Nepal who had lived in India for several long periods described this effect: "The politics here are distinct, the politics there are also unique. In each place, culture must be circulated in different forms".<sup>17</sup> As a respected guru's assistant who often played an important role during ritual practices, as well as a cultural performer who wrote and sang many of the lyrics on a BTWA-sponsored cassette of Thangmi language songs, Rana Bahadur was one of many Thangmi whose experiences of both India and Nepal as national frames effected a conscious recognition of the differences in technique, efficacy and audience that defined practice and performance. Within this diversity of experiences, the constant is a curiosity about the embodied effects of each form of ritualized action, and a sense that the relationship between them enables the ethnic collectivity to synthesize a coherent presence across borders and disparate life experiences.

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<sup>17</sup> Original Nepali: *Yahako rajniti alagai chha, tyahako pani alag chha. Thau thau ma pharak ruple sanskriti chalaunu parchha.*

In one direction, that curiosity manifests in the desire seasoned Thangmi cultural practitioners from Nepal to watch, and in some cases, participate in, stage-managed cultural performances like the one in Sikkim with which this chapter began. In the other direction, many Thangmi in India talk about opportunities to observe cultural practices, such as death or wedding rituals, with the same reverence with which they might discuss an audience with Sai Baba or the Dalai Lama. The increasing exposure of practitioners to performance, and performers to practice—through cheaper and easier cross-border travel and the trend of home-grown VCD production—has generated a debate within the community as a whole about what constitutes Thangmi culture, and what elements of it should be “standardized” for future reproduction (see Chapter 3).

The fact that this debate is actively taking place within the community itself, for whom members of which practice itself is still very much alive and a key component of identity, sets this case apart somewhat from other discussions of the production of heritage in the global economy. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett defines heritage as, “the transvaluation of the obsolete, the mistaken, the outmoded, the dead, and the defunct”, and as, “...a mode of production that has recourse to the past,” to “produce the local for export” (1995: 369). In the Thangmi case, practice remains very much alive, but it has increasingly come into relationship with performance. The two co-exist. Rather than fetishizing dead practices, the relatively recent emergence of the desire

to demonstrate heritage through performance for political purposes within India has in fact encouraged the continuation of practice in Nepal, and even the re-rooting of it in India, where it had previously disappeared. For most Thangmi, heritage has not yet become entirely detached from living practice itself, commodified by outside forces and reconstituted for the express purpose of consumption by others. I suspect that this is not so unusual, and may also be the case in other places and for other groups, but that the analytical obsession with dichotomizing authentic and inauthentic, practice and theory, has obscured such dynamics. Instead, although oriented towards external audiences, performance is produced by Thangmi, for Thangmi purposes, in constant conversation with practice itself.

### *Aesthetics, Affect and Efficacy*

The process of performing heritage sometimes has unexpected effects on the performers: many Thangmi in India told me that the experience of performance gave them a hint of what practice might be like, and encouraged them to seek out practice experiences in the company of Thangmi from Nepal, which in turn gave them a different feel (at the level of the body) for what it meant to be Thangmi. Such interlinkages begin to show how and why ethnic actors themselves view both practice and performance as integral to their own identity, within an indigenous frame of reference that includes individual states, their policies, and the borders between them.

When I asked Laxmi, one of the choreographers of the Sikkim performance, how she and her colleagues had put together these dances and conceptualized them as particularly Thangmi ones, she shrugged her shoulders and said:

We just choose whichever steps look good. We want to create something that people will want to watch, and will make them remember, ‘those Thangmi, they are good dancers’. That will help us.

When I pushed further to ask what made these dances particularly Thangmi, she said, “Well, we have Thangmi from Nepal in the group, and they know how to show *sakali* Thangmi culture, so we just trust them.” For her, the very presence of Thangmi from Nepal—who were stereotyped as having some experience with practice due to their background in rural villages, and their competence in the Thangmi language—was enough to provide an aura of authenticity, although she admitted that she did not know what constituted it. Clearly, she was aware of the aesthetic differences between what she had created as performance and Thangmi practice as such—and their concomitant differences in efficacy—but she seemed unconcerned with the affective differences between them.

The dancers from Nepal, on the other hand, knew that they *felt* different performing these choreographed dances on stage than they did when they participated in practice conducted by gurus at home. The bodily techniques entailed by each form of ritualized action were substantially different, as were the intended audiences and objectives:

performance required highly stylized, external movements recognizable by outside others who could help forward political objectives, while practice required an internally-oriented, almost meditative focus that appealed to deities who could help forward spiritual objectives.

The discomfort that the dancers from Nepal felt at the Sikkim performance (and presumably at other such events) derived not from the dissonance between the two experiences—as mentioned above, they were perfectly familiar with the distinction between the two modes of cultural production in Nepal as well—but from the sense that for some Thangmi in India, performance had eclipsed practice entirely to the extent that they did not recognize the value of the relationship between the two. Many Thangmi from Nepal, like the young Rana Bahadur, feared that the repeated, exclusive engagement with the field of performance might cause it to subsume entirely the field of practice; in essence, that what the Thangmi in India valued as *sakali* in the practice of Thangmi from Nepal would in the course of time cease to exist as it became exclusively appropriated as *nakali*.

Perhaps these concerns were unnecessary, for many Thangmi in India were on their own learning curve. The choreographer Laxmi confided that she had been overwhelmed by the experience of the funerary rituals that Latte Apa had conducted after the recent death of her brother Basant, the General Secretary of the BTWA quoted in Chapter 1. Basant's funeral was the first time that Laxmi had

participated in a full-blown Thangmi ritual practice conducted by a Thangmi guru, since her family had until recently been in the habit of using Hindu pandits instead, as had been typical for many Thangmi families in India for generations.<sup>18</sup> She was surprised by the positive effect that participating in the ritual as a practitioner, following the guru's instructions, had on her own fragile emotional state in the wake of her brother's death—very different from the orchestrating role that she was used to playing as dance choreographer. She saw these serious, complicated practices as an entirely separate domain from the upbeat dances that she choreographed, but she was beginning to recognize both as important features of Thangmi cultural production that deserved to be maintained and mutually supported.

In the contemporary national and transnational politico-cultural economies that shape Thangmi lives, maintaining the pragmatic conditions in which practice can be reproduced necessarily entails mounting performances. Those performances, in turn, must be able to allude to the ongoing life of practice in order to establish their own legitimacy as representations of a culture worthy of recognition. It follows that those with the *sakali* skills of performance cannot advance their own projects without collaboration from those with the *nakali* knowledge of practice, and vice versa. The combination of competence in both fields of ritualized action in a single individual is extremely

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<sup>18</sup> As David Gellner has noted in the Newar context, "Switching priest, and thereby switching the idiom in which the household's life-cycle rituals were performed, was, of course, an old practice, one that the upwardly mobile had always practised" (forthcoming a: 5).

rare, although that perhaps is changing, as the examples of relatively young Thangmi like Rana Bahadur and Laxmi described above show. For now, in order to advance their shared goals of reproducing the sacred object of Thangmi identity and securing “existential recognition” from a range of audiences, Thangmi with a diversity of life experiences—in Nepal and India, circular migrants and settled residents of both countries, young and old, gurus and activists, practitioners and performers—must work together in a synthetic manner to maintain the rules of conduct that govern Thangmi ethnicity. Mixed into the blend, this text is my part of the production, fully costumed in the garb of social scientific authority.



**CHAPTER THREE**  
**Origin Myths and Myths of Originality:**  
**Gurus, Activists and the Power of Orality**

“I need photos of very ‘original’ Thangmi,” said Paras, as he pushed a stack of photocopied documents across the table towards me, indicating the terms of our exchange. With his signature plaid cap, dark glasses and Nehru vest stretched over an expanding paunch, the president of the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association (BTWA) was the picture of a successful Indian civil servant at the height of his career. Paras had been at the helm of the BTWA since the early 1990s, but due to his posting in the customs office in urban Siliguri, some four hours by jeep from Darjeeling bazaar, he was rarely actually present at BTWA meetings or events. Although other members of the organization often complained about the fact that Paras got credit for successes that he had in fact contributed little towards achieving, his status as a well-educated senior government official lent the organization an air of authority that even Paras’ critics admitted was necessary. In much the same way, albeit on a different symbolic register, Paras now hoped that I could contribute images from my fieldwork across the border in Nepal that might lend an air of authority to the BTWA’s application for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status—the draft materials of which he had just given me on the condition that I would contribute to the final version as requested.

“What exactly do you mean by ‘original’?” I asked. “You know,” he said, raising his eyebrows, as if the fact that I even had to ask took his assessment of me down a notch,

‘Natural’ types of Thangmi, with less teeth than we have [he gestured to his own mouth], wide porters’ feet with no shoes, clothes woven from colorless natural fibers. But what we really need is more photos of people like that doing *puja* (N: rituals), at *jatra* (N: festivals), you know, *bore* (T: weddings), *mumpra* (T: funerals), all of those things that we can’t ‘videoalize’ so easily here.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, Paras was locating the “original”—a term whose triple entendre of “authentic” (in the literal sense of “original”), “primitive” (in the sense of “originary”) and “distinctive” (in the sense of possessing “originality”) seemed to suit his purposes well—in the poor economic conditions and heavily ritualized lifestyle that he stereotyped as characteristic of Thangmi in Nepal. For descendants of migrants who had left Nepal to settle in India several generations earlier, like Paras, Nepal served as a convenient metonym for an “original” Thangmi culture locked in a static past. At the level of personal practice, Paras and other relatively elite BTWA leaders sought to distance themselves from such markers of “originality”, which is why it was on some level a relief to them that these characteristics seemed to be more prevalent in Nepal (although reminders of them appeared in Darjeeling every year in the form of circular migrants). However, at the level of political discourse, the BTWA activists sought to appropriate and package such

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<sup>1</sup> “Videoalize” was the term that BTWA members used to describe the process of digital video documentation of key Thangmi cultural events, a project in which they were engaged throughout the course of my fieldwork.

“primitive traits” and “geographical isolation”—both perceived criteria for a successful ST application—in the service of their own agenda, at which level it was frustrating to them that such originality was difficult to document in Darjeeling itself.<sup>2</sup> This is where my photos came in.

At first, I thought that this obsession with locating the “original” in practice and packaging it in discursive terms was exclusive to activists in India like Paras, emerging in part from the sense of inadequacy that they felt about the fact that they themselves did not possess (or control) such “originality”. But upon further reflection and analysis of my ethnographic materials from both Nepal and India, I began to realize that in some way or another, the set of concepts condensed in the root-word “origin” played an important role in constituting feelings of Thangminess for almost everyone I had worked with, regardless of their citizenship, age, gender, economic status or education. Gurus in both Nepal and India used the terms *shristi* (N: creation) and *utpatti* (N: origin, genesis) to describe the process of ethnic emergence as recounted in their *paloke*, the centerpiece of Thangmi ritual practice during which the group’s origin stories are told.<sup>3</sup> Most Thangmi laypeople were familiar with such stories, which will be detailed below, and took strength from them as a positive

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 5 on ST politics and Chapter 6 on the problem of indigeneity in this context.

<sup>3</sup> Gaenszle notes that in the Mewahang Rai context, “there is evidence that the word *shristi* ... tends to refer to the Primal Creation, the arising of the First Being, while *utpatti* ... tends to refer to genesis, the physical birth of the species ...” (2000: 230 n. 305). Although there may be a similar nuance in Thangmi usage, most laypeople seem to use the terms interchangeably.

statement of originality that helped counter feelings of marginalization.

Thangmi ethnic activists in Nepal also used the concepts of “original” and “originality” regularly in their speeches and writings in order to emphasize the enduring and distinctive qualities of Thangminess, although they typically used the Nepali words *maulik* and *maulikta* respectively instead of the English ‘original’ as Paras had.<sup>4</sup> For instance, in a discussion of the challenges that Thangmi face in distinguishing themselves from Tamang in the face of academic misrepresentations (see Chapter 1), the Jhapa-based activist Megh Raj (who is described in more detail in Chapter 5) concludes his argument with the statement that, “Thami is a complete ethnicity with its own original identity, existence and pride” (Niko 2003: 46).<sup>5</sup> In some ways, “original”, or *maulik*, can be seen as a synonym for *sakali* (as described in Chapter 2), although the former term gestures towards the source of ethnic origins in a distant past as an important marker of identity in the present in a more explicitly historical sense than the latter does.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The use of English instead of Nepali terms in Darjeeling reflects broader patterns of language usage there, and does not directly indicate the educational status of the speaker.

<sup>5</sup> Original Nepali: *Thami euta singo ‘jat’ ho jasko mauлик pahichan, astitwa, ra san chha*. *Singo* connotes “complete” in the holistic sense, with all of its component pieces intact. In addition, in a fundraising brochure aimed at establishing a new association (which was not successful), Kabiraj (an activist from the village of Lapilang, Dolakha) writes, “The main objectives of this association are: to promote and preserve the language, art, culture, customs, traditions, religion, costumes, rituals, literature, life styles and norms and values, which represent the ethnic identity and originality (*maulikta*) of the backward indigenous Thami across Nepal” (TCUAN 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Anna Stirr has translated *maulik* as “authentic” in her discussions of the popular folk music scene in Nepal (personal communication). Additional research that pays careful attention to the full range of contexts in which such terms are used in contemporary

In this chapter, I show how diverse invocations of shared origins and originalities—in practice, performance and discourse by gurus, laypeople and activists—indicate a convergence of varied Thangmi worldviews around what we might call the sacred originary, recalling Godelier’s statement that, “the sacred is a certain kind of relationship with the origin” (1999: 169).<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps not shared descent per se, but knowledge of a shared myth of it, that works as a universal marker of belonging throughout the transnational Thangmi community by pointing towards the original as that which imbues the sacred object of identity with its power.

The differences that I observed in relationships to and expressions of the original—which I had initially thought indexed country-specific responses to the particular politics of recognition encountered in India and Nepal respectively—were in fact not exclusively determined by political and economic particularities in each country, but rather more by educational and generational positionalities which entailed different techniques for controlling and strategically deploying originary power. That a shared narrative of origin constituted the power of Thangminess as a category at the most fundamental level was so taken for granted that it was almost never stated explicitly, and it therefore took me a long time to understand this fact. Rather, the question up for public debate within the Thangmi

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Nepal will help shed light on their specific meanings within the context of ethnic politics.

<sup>7</sup> See the extended quotation as cited in Chapter 2.

community throughout my fieldwork was how to best marshal that sacred power in the service of competing agendas, so it was these divides which appeared most evident to me.

Levi-Strauss once suggested that, “In order for a culture to be really itself and to produce something, the culture and its members must be convinced of their originality” (1979: 20). Thangmi origin myths at once work to assert such originality in the functional, diachronic sense, in which myth is read as a charter for the group’s contemporary identity claims vis-a-vis the broader social world, *and* to reproduce originality in a structural, synchronic manner within the realm of Thangmi social relations. Both of these interpretations of myth—which resonate loosely with Malinowskian and Levi-Straussian theories of myth respectively—are recognized within the Thangmi community, but I suggest that in general, activists are more interested in the functional properties of myth, while gurus emphasize its structural reality. I will return to these assertions shortly.

Gurus (and indirectly, their adherents) access originary power by propitiating territorial deities through a set of oral recitations that recount Thangmi origin myths in a ritual register of the Thangmi language. The purposes of these recitations are twofold. The first objective is to secure divine recognition of the special relationship between the Thangmi and their territory, as articulated in these mythic narratives. Such divine recognition is necessary to ensure a range of positive pragmatic effects, such as good harvests and the overall

continued survival of the community (see Chapter 6). The second objective is to reproduce a form of “mythical thought” (Lévi-Strauss 1979: 6, 1987 [1973]: 173, 184) which effects an inseparable link between Thangminess and the oral transmission of cultural knowledge. Such mythical thought is conceptualized by members of the Thangmi community—both gurus and activists—to exist in opposition to scientific thought, with its reliance on written transmission.<sup>8</sup> The efficacy of a guru’s practice depends upon the power of the individual himself to recite the correct propitiation chants (primarily in a ritual language that others cannot understand) in an embodied manner which is defined by its orality. In this mode of practice, lay Thangmi do not have direct access to originary power, and instead must rely upon their gurus to mediate it for them when necessary.

Ethnic activists, on the other hand, seek to access originary power directly through “entextualization” (Bauman and Briggs 1990) and “scripturalization” (Gaenszle forthcoming), using the technology of writing—primarily in Nepali, not Thangmi and certainly not Thangmi ritual language—to challenge the orally-mandated authority embodied in gurus themselves. Bauman and Briggs define “entextualization” as “the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit—a *text*—that can be lifted out of its

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<sup>8</sup> Lévi-Strauss suggests that “mythical thought” was the antithetical foil for early proponents of “scientific thought” (1979: 6), but that more recently science has come to appreciate the value of myth. I suggest that Thangmi views of “science” and “myth” are engaged in a similarly dialectical process, which may further illuminate the unanswered question of whether myth has also come to appreciate science.

interactional setting” (1990: 73).<sup>9</sup> “Scripturalization” adds the sense of, “a religious use of the writings, sometimes including the use in ritual” (Gaenszle forthcoming: 2).<sup>10</sup> By writing down myths of origin, as well as the details of the ritual practices that unlock their power, activists attempt to objectify the original for the purposes of political recognition in a manner that bypasses gurus’ oral control of it.<sup>11</sup> In this formulation, originary power is not fundamentally embedded in the embodied practice of the guru, but rather can be extracted and redeployed in other contexts (by other agents) in the objectified, entextualized form of his knowledge, as well as in the static (and silent) symbol of the guru’s body as a living sign of itself.<sup>12</sup> For example, an image of several gurus dancing is emblazoned on BTWA

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<sup>9</sup> Gaenszle suggests that Mewahang Rai priests, “can be seen as masters of entextualization”, and that it is “the ability to use the ritual idiom in a non-mechanical, active, creative manner, which is at the base of priestly power and authority” (2002: 185).

<sup>10</sup> Building upon Sheldon Pollock’s use of the terms “literization” and “literarization”—the “initial process of inscription” and the process of “turning into literature” respectively (Pollock 1998: 41)—Gaenszle suggests that the term “scripturalization” adds the additional sense of “formation of a sacred scriptural tradition” (forthcoming: 2). The tension between oral and written traditions, sometimes cast as “great and little traditions” (Redfield 1960) is of course a long-standing theme in anthropology and the social sciences in general (see particularly Goody 1986, 2000; Ong 1982). In Nepal in particular, see Charles Ramble (1983) on the tensions between oral and literate traditions in Mustang; Sherry Ortner (1989, 1995a) on the process of Sherpa religious “rationalization”; and William Fisher (2001) on the related process of what he calls “codifying” Thakali culture.

<sup>11</sup> Another aspect of this activist agenda has been to search for a “lost” Thangmi script which would somehow render the process of entextualization easier, and more politically effective (or at least that is the hope). Unlike the Limbu, Rai, and Lepcha communities who can claim historical proof of unique scripts as a “symbolic resource” within ethnic activist contexts in both Nepal and India (Gaenszle forthcoming), Thangmi has never had its own orthography. Some activists seek to create a Thangmi alphabet, but there are many practical challenges to this, and Devanagari needs only minor modifications to represent Thangmi phonology accurately.

<sup>12</sup> Recall the citation from Kirshenblatt-Gimblett presented at the end of Chapter 2.



certificates of recognition issued for outstanding contributions to the Thangmi activist cause.

At the same time, activists seek to transform the mythical thought of the gurus into a form of scientific thought. Activist publications suggest that Thangmi must “align our footsteps along with the movement of scientific changes” (Samudaya 2061 [2056]: 37), in order to remedy the fact that, “while the present scientific development has reached a climax, the Thami community is still backward and voiceless” (Niko 2003: 10). However, the object of such ostensibly scientific thinking remains Thangmi myth itself; activists do not propose to substitute myth entirely with science at the ontological level. Rather they attempt to reevaluate the object of myth, which remains consistently at the core of Thangminess, with what they believe to be a new set of epistemological tools that will yield improved results. In this process, they demonstrate that myth remains the object of scientific, as well as mythical thought, and ritual—whether enacted as practice or performance—its expression.

Since activists are almost never gurus themselves (or vice versa), in order to obtain objectified versions of originary knowledge for the purposes of scientific analysis, as well as recognizable symbols of that knowledge, activists depend upon gurus to maintain their embodied, orally transmitted form of practice, which explicitly resists entextualization. This is the paradox that keeps contemporary Thangmi activists interested in the welfare of gurus, and which

provides gurus with the conditions in which to continue their practice (often with financial support from activist sources) in a vibrant manner even in the face of social transformations which might otherwise undercut interest in their power.<sup>13</sup> Just as *sakali* and *nakali* forms of action are mutually constitutive, gurus and activists have come to rely on components of each other's strategies for gaining recognition. Despite their semi-private critiques of each other's agendas and techniques, activists often attend rituals and guru sometimes participate in political meetings—the respective public forums in which each group demonstrates their power.<sup>14</sup> Again, the sacred object of identity remains shared for the two groups. They differ not over what it is, but rather how to access and deploy its power to obtain the most effective form of recognition.

It is in this attempt to access originary power that activist strategies of objectification enacted within the frame of political performance (meetings, cultural shows, publications)—often in a specialized linguistic register not easily understood by laypeople—

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<sup>13</sup> There has been much discussion of the relationship between shamanism and literate traditions in the Himalayas and beyond (Berreman 1964; Holmberg 1989; Mumford 1989; Samuel 1993; Ortner 1995). Here I take a slightly different approach by suggesting that the forces competing for power are shamans and activists within a single ritual system, rather than shamans and the representatives of a literate tradition such as Hinduism or Buddhism. Yet the modes of power that they each group is associated with—oral versus literate—remain the same. The question, however, is not whether shamans will disappear or be subsumed by an encroaching literate tradition, but rather whether activists will be able to succeed in appropriating the shamanic.

<sup>14</sup> The description of Bhume Jatra in Chapter 6 illustrates how both types of power may be expressed publicly in a simultaneous fashion, while the description of the Second National Thami Convention in Chapter 5 is an example of a situation where they were in direct competition.

become ritualized activities. Just as gurus' strategies of objectification are enacted within the frame of practice (life cycle rituals, calendrical festivals, deity propitiations) in ritual language, such political performances assert power by articulating relationships with the sacred originary in ritual forms visible within the social world. In this regard, activist publications that "entextualize" oral traditions are indeed methods of "scripturalization" in the sense that the resulting texts are intended for use in ritual contexts.<sup>15</sup> However, the ritual contexts in which those activists involved in the process of scripturalization imagine their written products will be used are not those orchestrated by gurus for a divine audience (and in fact can not be, since most gurus reject scripturalized forms of their knowledge as non-efficacious), but rather those orchestrated by activist-authors for a political audience.

*Myth:Science::Rites:Politics*

Here I wish to wade for a moment into sacred anthropological waters by reflecting upon two enduring questions within the discipline from the particular vantage point of the Thangmi ethnography offered here. First, what is the purpose of myth? Second, what is the relationship between myth and ritual?

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<sup>15</sup> Bauman and Briggs provide a useful review of the literature on the relationship between text and context (1990).

Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss are usually depicted as occupying opposite ends of the continuum between functionalist and structuralist approaches to myth. I suggest, however, that Thangmi attitudes towards myth may present an ethnographic path towards a less oppositional imagining of the relationship between these two theoretical paradigms. Malinowski asserted that among the Trobrianders with whom he worked, “Myth is not only looked upon as a commentary of additional information, but it is a warrant, a charter, and often even a practical guide to the activities with which it is connected” (1974 [1948]: 107–108). From this perspective, myth is essentially a repository of functional knowledge, which can at any time be activated as the basis for behavior within the social world. For Lévi-Strauss, by contrast, myths:

do not seek to depict what is real, but to justify the shortcomings of reality, since the extreme positions are only *imagined* in order to show that they are *untenable*. This step, which is fitting for mythical thought, implies an admission (but in the veiled language of the myth) that the social facts when thus examined are marred by an unsurmountable contradiction...

This conception of the relation of the myth to reality no doubt limits the use of the former as a documentary source. But it opens the way for other possibilities; for, in abandoning the search for a constantly accurate picture of ethnographic reality in the myth, we gain, on occasions, a means of reaching unconscious categories. (1987 [1973]: 173).

From the point of view of many Thangmi activists, myth is interesting primarily, “as a documentary source” that can be used to shore up the “ethnographic reality” of their own cultural claims, while from the point of view of most Thangmi gurus, myth is first and foremost “a means of

reaching unconscious categories”. Each group is aware of the others’ perspective, however: activists cannot deny the gurus’ capacity to generate symbolic power through the manipulation of apparently unconscious, non-rational, categories; and gurus also highlight the resonance between myth with reality in certain cases, particularly when such links appear to shore up projects of recognition in which gurus also have a stake. Since both of these propensities towards myth are embedded within the worldviews of the community whom I seek to depict ethnographically, my anthropological analysis demands a theory of myth which allows both perspectives to stand as parts of a complex conceptual totality.

Outlining such a theory requires further discussion of the relationship between “text” and “context” that first emerged in anthropological debates over myth, and continues in discussions of ritual and performance today (Bauman and Briggs 1990). In Malinowski’s view, “the text, of course, is extremely important, but without the context it remains lifeless” (1974 [1948]: 104). Edmund Leach critiques this functionalist emphasis on context in the introduction to a volume that explores the utility of Lévi-Straussian structuralism:

Functionalism in anthropology, especially in the form espoused by Malinowski, proved a constrictive doctrine, for if everything must be seen in context how can one generalize at all? Lévi-Strauss’ ‘structuralism’ is the dialectical reaction to ‘functionalism’ in this narrow sense. (1967: xvi).

However, Leach goes on to state that, “So far as myth analysis is concerned, he [Lévi-Strauss] largely accepts Malinowski’s view that, in

any particular cultural context, ‘myth is a charter for social action’” (1967: xvii). By the same token, a close reading of Malinowski shows that his view of myth as charter does not necessarily preclude what we might call a structuralist definition of myth as the unconscious domain of the socially untenable. Malinowski writes, “Myths serve to cover certain inconsistencies created by historical events, rather than to record these events exactly” (1974[1948]: 125). One of the key differences between the two thinkers, then, seems to lie not in their choices to emphasize text rather than context, or vice versa, but rather in their definition of “context” itself.

For Malinowski, context is everything:

The intellectual nature of a story is exhausted with its text, but the functional, cultural, and pragmatic aspect of any native tale is manifested as much in its enactment, embodiment, and contextual relations as in the text. It is easier to write down the story than to observe the diffuse, complex ways in which it enters into life ...” (1974[1948]: 111)

He suggests that simply writing down the story—rendering it textual<sup>16</sup>—is a methodologically inadequate manner of analyzing myth, which should instead be observed in the context of its ritual enactment.

However, the one-to-one correlation that Malinowski makes between “text” and “context” suggests that the latter is an unchanging domain, a

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<sup>16</sup> Tania Li (following Nikolas Rose) proposes the eerily similar term “rendering technical” to describe what the World Bank and other development agencies do with empirical ethnographic material: “*Rendering technical* means to represent the arena of intervention ‘as an intelligible field with specifiable limits and particular characteristics . . . whose component parts are linked together in some more or less systematic manner by forces, attractions and coexistences’ (Rose 1999:33)” (Li 2005: 389). We might see this as a process parallel to that of “rendering textual” oral traditions, both of which seek to transform unruly, often apparently illogical empirical realities into domains comprehensible through orderly, logical scientific thinking.

synchronic set of rules which the patient ethnographer must learn in order to interpret the former. This formulation does not leave space for context itself—the particular mechanisms through which text is enacted and embodied—to change, either over time or among different members of a community. It is this rigidity that leads Leach to suggest that Malinowski's prerogative to "see everything in context" makes it impossible to generalize at all, and to laud structuralism as the antidote to this form of narrow functionalism.

Indeed, Levi-Strauss' much critiqued lack of attention to the enacted context of myth can in fact be read as liberating the concept of "context" from the ahistorical chains with which functionalism secured it. In other words, by focusing solely on the semiotic properties of myth, rather than trying to locate its social referents in any particular spatio-temporal context, Lévi-Strauss in fact *allows*, rather than circumscribes, the potential for such contexts to vary. As Mary Douglas puts it, "From the point of view of anthropology, one of Lévi-Strauss' novel departures is to treat all versions of a myth as equally authentic or relevant" (1967: 51). Indeed, Lévi-Strauss suggests that myths function at multiple symbolic levels at once, through geographic, techno-economic, sociological, and cosmological schemas (1987 [1973: 158]. These can be variously reinterpreted within a range of enacted contexts—some schemas emphasized, others downplayed, at particular historical conjunctures—but the myth endures as a total symbolic system despite such contingent shifts in context. It is in this

manner that Thangmi myths can serve as shared objects of identity for both gurus and activists, despite the different contexts—ritual practice and political performance—in which each group primarily enacts and interprets them.

From an anthropological perspective, all such contexts are equally worthy of analytical attention—but this is not equally true from all Thangmi perspectives. Like Malinowski, Thangmi gurus do not believe that text and context can be separated; in their view, ritual enactment is the only legitimate manner of expressing the symbolic system of myth. Activists, to the contrary, believe that liberating the text from its outmoded ritual context is the only way to “preserve” the value of the symbolic system itself. Here the tables are turned, and the gurus whom I introduced as preoccupied with structural aspects of myth are shown to take a functionalist approach when it comes to the relationship between text and context, whereas the activists whom I introduced as primarily interested in the functional aspects of myth are revealed as closet structuralists seeking to decouple the structure of myth from its practice context.

This apparent contradiction only indicates further the importance of an approach which recognizes both aspects of myth as part of the whole—just as gurus, activists, and the full range of Thangmi individuals in multiple locations are recognized as equally important actors in the production of Thangmi identity. Myth remains a powerful resource for forwarding a range of Thangm agendas, amidst shifts in context which



rearticulate relationships between individual actors, sacred origins, and modes of expressing the links between them. The actions through which gurus articulate their relationship with myth may be most easily comprehensible under the rubric of “ritual”, while those which activists employ may be termed “politics”, but I suggest that the epistemological boundary between these two categories is fuzzy at best because both domains share the ontological referent of the sacred originary. Understanding this shared obsession demands an anthropological approach which recognizes both mythical thinking and scientific thinking, ritual and politics, as mutually dependent component parts of a totality that encompasses multiple contexts.

Indeed, the majority of Thangmi are neither gurus or activists, but most are aware of the different forms of power that each represents, as well as the relationships between them. Thangmi individuals often express the differences between themselves and people they perceive to be more closely associated with the other form of power in terms of education—whether one is *padhai-lekhai* (N)—literally “capable of reading and writing” or not. Gurus and their practice are generally associated with the non-literate, while activists and their writing are associated with the literate.<sup>17</sup> These paradigms and their limitations are discussed further below.

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<sup>17</sup> This is not to suggest that all gurus themselves are illiterate, or that all activists are literate. Literacy divides more along generational lines, and to the extent that the majority of guru belong to senior generations, many of them are only minimally literate. However, this is changing as younger guru who have been to school begin to climb up the ritual hierarchy. On the activist side, most of those in leadership positions are literate, but again, not all—Shova, for instance, a prominent woman

For now, let us turn to the figure of the guru as an embodiment of sacred power, and to the content of Thangmi origin myths. In the ensuing discussion, I focus on how origin myths and gurus' interpretations of them establish Thangmi identity as sacred within an indigenous classificatory system that valorizes themes of synthesis, producing a sense of "originality" that is at once a source of pride due to its distinctiveness, and an embarrassment due to its perceived divergence from the criteria for recognition within dominant national discourses.

### *A Tale of Two Gurus*

The central figure of Thangmi ritual practice is undoubtedly the guru.<sup>18</sup> Often referred to as *guru apa*, meaning "guru father", Thangmi gurus indeed play a paternal role within their spheres of influence. Many lay Thangmi look to their local guru for guidance when faced with practical decisions of cultural importance: whom to marry, how to conduct a funeral, or when to make offerings to secure a deity's good graces.<sup>19</sup>

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leader in the BTWA, is not literate, and many of the older NTS leaders were self-taught with only basic literacy skills. The issue is therefore not so much whether one has literary competence, but whether one views oral or textual modes of knowledge reproduction as the most powerful.

<sup>18</sup> Clearly borrowed from Nepali, or perhaps even directly from Sanskrit, the term *guru* has been indigenized to mean shaman, or ritual practitioner, in the Thangmi language.

<sup>19</sup> Peet represented Thangmi gurus as explicitly non-political community leaders: "it is the *jhankris* who were and still are important Thami leaders in many non-political activities, but especially religious, ritual and social events" (1978: 254). I would beg to differ with his definition of "politics", and suggest that gurus can indeed be highly political figures.

In theory, the guru who officiate at Thangmi rituals should not also act as healers, setting them apart from the popular pan-Nepali image of the *jhankri* (N), or “faith healer”.<sup>20</sup> There are indeed Thangmi *jhankri* who conduct curative rituals, but they are perceived to be in a separate category of lower status than the guru who preside over marriage and funerary rites.<sup>21</sup> In reality, however, these two roles of priest and healer are often conflated in one individual, and apparently for this reason the roles are differentiated by unique terms of address in each context. The title for a guru while conducting *mumpra* (T), or funerary rituals, is *lama bonpo* (T), a term used exclusively at this time.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the title *khami* (T) is reserved to describe the guru during *bore* (T), or marriage rituals.<sup>23</sup> These terms of address highlight the priest-like function and status of the guru while presiding over the life cycle rituals that are central to producing ethnic identity at the level of the group, as distinct from their role as healers conducting curative rituals for individuals. Activist publications make much of these unique

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<sup>20</sup> See Hitchcock and Jones (1976) and Miller (1997 [1979]) among many other monographs and articles on the broader theme of Himalayan shamanism.

<sup>21</sup> Such a division of labor has been documented for many other Himalayan ethnic groups, e.g. the Dumi (van Driem 1993: 22–47) and Mewahang Rai (Gaenszle 2002: 57–66). Peet also observed it within the Thangmi community: “among *jhankris* there seem to be two different types, the more respected being also the more knowledgeable, the others acting mainly as shaman-mediums in diagnosing and curing disease” (1978: 271).

<sup>22</sup> In the Tamang tradition, the terms *lama* and *bonpo* refer to two distinct categories of ritual practitioners. *Lama* are Buddhist, and largely responsible for death rituals, while *bonpo* are shamanic practitioners who focus primarily on healing and propitiating the spirit world (Holmberg 1989). In Thangmi practice, *lama bonpo* is a compound term that refers exclusively to the practitioner of a death ritual while he is performing it.

<sup>23</sup> To Nepali speakers, the aspirated *khami* is entirely distinct from the unaspirated *kami* (the *dalit* blacksmith caste), but many Thangmi suggest that this is another cause for misrecognition of Thangmi as a low-caste group.

titles: for instance, Megh Raj describes the *khami* as one of many, “people who organize things at different levels of society”, the existence of which are evidence of Thangmi “completeness” as an ethnic group (Niko 2003: 45). Many activists take the term *lama bonpo* as evidence of the fact that Thangmi were historically adherents of the Bon religion prevalent through much of Tibet and the Himalayas before the advent of Buddhism, and use the terms *bonpo* or *bombo* to connote what they call “ethnic religion” (Niko 2003: 40) or “natural religion” (Samudaya 2061 [2056]: 41).<sup>24</sup> Both gurus and activists talk about their exclusive reliance on guru as a marker of identity that sets them apart from other *janajati* groups in Nepal, such as the Gurung and Tamang, whom in addition to their own shamans, employ ritual specialists from a literate tradition (either Buddhist *lama* and/or Hindu

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<sup>24</sup> As of yet, I have been unable to trace in detail the how Thangmi became acquainted with this term and decided that it appropriately described their religious practice. In the Tibetan context, the term *bonpo* or *bon* refers to a specific lineage tradition which the Dalai Lama recently recognized as a fifth sect of Buddhism. Several villages in Nepal’s Mustang and Dolpo districts identify as *bonpo* in this sense, as does a sub-group of the Tibetan exile community, and several communities in eastern Tibetan areas that are now part of China’s Sichuan and Gansu provinces. The definition of “Bon” remains a matter of active scholarly debate among Buddhologists and Tibetologists. Geoffrey Samuel gives a useful summary: “Bon remained a kind of amalgam of early Tibetan religion, contemporary Tibetan folk religion, black magic and sorcery, a generic label for all the aspects of Tibetan religion which did not fit neatly into Western stereotypes of proper Buddhism. The real problem with this approach is that it collapses a very complex historical process, in which Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan Bon religion developed side by side, into an unhistorical model in which pure Buddhism comes from India and degenerates under the influence of the native Bon religion” (1993: 323). He concludes, however, that, “the modern Bonpo are to all intents and purposes the followers of a Buddhist religious tradition, with certain differences of vocabulary from the other four major traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, but no major difference in content” (Samuel 1993: 326). This definition is substantially different from the one that Thangmi activists attach to the term *bonpo*, and more research on the relationships between these different usages is necessary.

*pandit*) to create a multi-leveled ritual system.<sup>25</sup> In a rather lyrical fashion, Khumbalal (a senior NTS activist described in further detail in Chapter 5) demonstrates well how the figure of the guru can be used as a symbol of Thangmi originality:

When a child starts hearing and seeing, he first hears the sound of the shamanic drum. He sees the guru apa reciting his *mantra*. From that time onwards, he sees nothing except the drum of the guru apa; he sees neither the Brahmin priest playing a conch shell and a bell, nor the monk with dark red clothes and a pointed cap awho chants, *om mani pame hum*, nor the priest with a cross around his neck, a white shirt and a bible in his hand, nor the Muslim with white clothes and a white cap with two hands on his ears saying *allah ho akbar*. He [the Thangmi child] sees and hears only the sound of the big drum and the natural world, like the moon, sun, land, gods, goddesses, rivers and streams, hills and mountaintops. He sees only the guru apa conducting rituals for the protection and well-being of all the people. (Samudaya 2061 [2056] VS: 39)

Although this passage overstates the boundedness of Thangmi communities—most children will in fact have seen other religious practitioners, even if their families do not employ them—its evocation of the guru apa as the central figure in Thangmi ritual life is realistic. Gurus were therefore key figures in my research, and I developed particularly close relationships with two such ritual specialists. Setting out as I did to document the components of Thangmi cultural presence (see Chapter 1), it is hardly surprising that I began my research by focusing on guru and their practice. Only later did I come to know and understand the complementary importance of activists as well. In

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<sup>25</sup> See Mumford (1989) on the interface between Gurung Buddhism and shamanism, and Holmberg (1989) for a relevant discussion of Tamang religious roles.

Nepal, I worked intensively with Rana Bahadur (who was introduced in Chapter 1) in the village of Damarang in Suspa–Kshamawati Village Development Committee (VDC), Dolakha district. In India, I spent many fruitful weeks talking with Man Bahadur, popularly known as Latte Apa, in and around his home in the Tungsung area of Darjeeling municipality in West Bengal.

Rana Bahadur was in his late seventies when I first met him in 1998, and although still respected as the most knowledgeable guru in the area, he had largely withdrawn from public ritual and was focused on placating his personal deities and preparing himself for death (See Figure 3.1).<sup>26</sup> I was lucky to spend several months recording his renditions of many mythical and ritual schemas, including those detailing Thangmi origins and the funerary cycle (see Chapter 7), before he passed away in 2003. Latte Apa, who was in his early sixties when we first met in 2000, received his nickname from his long *latte* (N), or matted lock of hair, which he claimed held his power (See Figure 3.2). When not contained by a brightly-colored knit hat, which the guru changed daily in an apparent fashion statement, the long lock tumbled down from the crown of his head to brush the floor. An impressive character fully in command of both practice and performance, Latte Apa was the public face of Thangmi life in Darjeeling, both as the chief guru conducting marriages, funerals, and other key rituals, and as the

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<sup>26</sup> Rana Bahadur's nickname was Pilandare, the name by which many older residents of Suspa knew him, but for reasons that I do not fully understand he requested that I use his legal name when writing about him instead. This was the opposite of Latte Apa's request that I refer to him by his nickname, rather than his legal name.

figurehead at the front of many BTWA delegations to cultural programs and political events.

These two senior gurus in many ways led parallel lives, with one crucial difference: although both were born in villages in Nepal's Dolakha district and migrated to India in their youth, Rana Bahadur eventually returned to his natal village of Damarang, while Latte Apa chose to settle in Darjeeling. A brief summary of their life stories shows how migration from Nepal to India, and, at least in Rana Bahadur's case, back again, was central to shaping both of their worldviews, as well as their individual interpretations of Thangmi origins and the power they held. By introducing them together in this way, I want to emphasize that national borders do not in themselves produce definitively different forms of practice or performance; we cannot compare these gurus' practices play-by-play, ritual move by ritual move. Rather, the key ritual practitioners in both countries have been influenced by similar personal and historical events that have taken them across multiple borders, multiple times, to create repertoires of action framed both by political conditions and personal circumstances. This is equally the case for many lay Thangmi, but guru like Rana Bahadur and Latte Apa have a particularly important role to play in the process of circulating ideas about Thangmi identity back and forth across borders, since the way in which they enact specific practices, as well as their general ethnic ethos, provides a model—and

sometimes a foil—for both lay and activist Thangmi living in their spheres of influence.



Figure 3.1 Rana Bahadur, Balasode, Suspa, Dolakha District, Nepal, January 2000



Figure 3.2 Latte Apa reciting his *paloke*, Jawahar Basti, Darjeeling District, West Bengal, India, November 2004



*Rana Bahadur*<sup>27</sup>

Rana Bahadur was born around 1920 in the village of Suspa, near Dolakha bazaar.<sup>28</sup> When he was 12, his mother died in childbirth with a younger sibling. His father, Bagdole, was a *mizar* (N), a local tax collector who answered to representatives of the central state in Kathmandu. Bagdole's status meant that the family was relatively well off, but that didn't stop them from migrating to India during the last decade of British rule, when Rana Bahadur was about 20 years old. He and his father traveled together, picking up menial labor on tea plantations in a variety of places, most importantly near Siliguri (in the Darjeeling district of contemporary West Bengal state) and Jalpaiguri. After they had been in India for about five years, Bagdole died unexpectedly after a brief and sudden illness. At the age of 25, Rana Bahadur was left alone with the task of conducting his father's funerary rites. As he explained,

This was very difficult. We were so far from home. There were almost no other Thangmi. I looked everywhere to find a guru who could do the funerary rites in the correct manner. No one knew what I was talking about. I had heard that there was a Thangmi guru from Surkhe [a village in Dolakha] living on another tea plantation nearby. I went to find him, crying all the way. He agreed to come.

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<sup>27</sup> The information in this section is drawn from multiple interviews conducted with Rana Bahadur between October 1999 and January 2002. It is supplemented by data from interviews with his wife Maili and sons Mangal Bahadur and Sundar Kumar conducted between October 1999 and April 2007. All interviews were conducted in Damarang, Suspa VDC, Dolakha District, Nepal.

<sup>28</sup> Most older Thangmi do not know their specific birthdates. In rural Nepal, written records were not routine until the 1960s at the earliest, and individuals from Rana Bahadur's generation usually know only their approximate age.

Over the course of the funerary ritual cycle, which is spread out over several weeks, Rana Bahadur was struck by the difficulty of conducting the ritual appropriately away from home, and he resolved to learn more about Thangmi cultural practice.<sup>29</sup> At this point, Rana Bahadur had not yet been summoned by the deities who later tutored him in shamanic practice; but his interest in learning about the forms of Thangmi ritual practice was piqued by the emotionally and practically challenging experience of having to conduct his father's last rites far away from home.

Rana Bahadur considered returning home after his father's death, but he had already begun a relationship with the woman who later became his wife and the mother of his six children.<sup>30</sup> Maili was a Thangmi woman from Nepal's Sindhupalchok district who had migrated to India as a child with her parents. In Nepal, marriages and other social alliances between Dolakha and Sindhupalchok Thangmi are rare. But in India, finding a Thangmi wife at all, regardless of where she was from, was a windfall. Rana Bahadur first lived with Maili's older sister, but when she left him for someone else, he set his sights on the 17-year old Maili. He was ten years her senior and ready to settle

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<sup>29</sup> The first Thangmi association, the Bhai Larke Thami Samaj (BLTS), was founded in 1943 in Darjeeling for the express purpose of helping migrant Thangmi conduct funerary rites (see Chapter 5 for additional details.)

<sup>30</sup> The distinction between "wife" and "mother of children" is important, since it implies the fluidity of Thangmi sexual and marriage norms, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7. Rana Bahadur always spoke proudly of the fact that he had had seven other "wives" before settling down with Maili, with whom his marriage was only ritually formalized long after the birth of their first child.

down, and he made the decision to remain in India in order to court Maili and secure her family's approval.

In 1947, Rana Bahadur and Maili established their own household within the workers' quarters on the tea plantation, and soon had a first daughter. Two sons and two more daughters quickly followed, and Rana Bahadur began to think about purchasing his own land and building a house back in Nepal. The 1950 political shifts in Nepal also affected his thinking; the feudal Rana regime had been ousted and King Tribhuvan was promising a more democratic future.<sup>31</sup> With rumors of major land reform in the air, it seemed like an ideal time to invest savings earned in India back in his home village in Nepal. Still in India, at the age of 32, Rana Bahadur began having visions and dreams in which territorial deities from his natal village entreated him to return and become a guru. They directed him towards a forested area called Balasode, southeast of his natal village of Suspa, which was an important location in the Thangmi origin tale, where the Thangmi foremother Sunari Ama lost a bracelet on the journey to Rangathali where she and her husband Ya'apa finally settled (see Chapter 6 for this portion of the story). When Rana Bahadur and his family arrived in Dolakha, he learned that a large swathe of jungle was indeed available for sale around Balasode, and he snapped it up. He and his wife erected a temporary shelter, and then spent the next year clearing

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<sup>31</sup> These events are well documented in Hoftun, Raeper and Whelpton (1999) and Whelpton (2005).

trees, turning the jungle into farmland, and building a house. His youngest son was born soon thereafter—the only one of his six children to be born in Nepal.

Grateful to the deities for guiding him back to Nepal at this fortuitous time, and now finally back in a place where he could pursue his desire to engage more seriously in Thangmi ritual practice, Rana Bahadur apprenticed himself to a senior guru apa. He continued to be possessed by deities, and claims to have learned most of what he knows about Thangmi ritual, myth and origins in these unsolicited encounters. His “formal” shamanic training taught him to control these sessions, in order to enter and exit trance willingly, but the content of his knowledge was transmitted to him orally by divine beings rather than by a human teacher. This direct connection with the deities was one element of what made him a powerful guru and garnered the respect of many Damarang locals, who had at first been somewhat suspicious of this returnee from India. He soon became well-known for his ability to propitiate and placate even the most ornery local deities with an impressively detailed style of oral recitation. Once distraught over his inability to conduct his own father’s *mumpra* in India, now back in Nepal he became Suspa’s most sought after *mumpra* practitioner.

### *Latte Apa*<sup>32</sup>

Like Rana Bahadur, Latte Apa had an eclectic style as a guru, and in fact it seems that both men were popularly perceived as powerful gurus due to their charismatic personalities, rather than their impeccable knowledge or meticulous technique. Thangmi activists in Darjeeling who sought to standardize Thangmi ritual practice through scripturalization saw Latte Apa as both a powerful adversary—due to his strong advocacy of orality as a defining component of Thangmi identity—and as a powerful asset, due to his strikingly original presence. With his sonorous voice, unusually tall stature, purposeful stride, and powerful lock of hair, Latte Apa counted much of the Darjeeling lay Thangmi community as members of his unabashed cult of personality. Others, however, found his stranglehold on ritual authority distressing—particularly the fact that he emphasized the power of ritual language which few others could understand—and sought to circumvent that power.

Born in 1937 in the Thangmi village of Alampu in the most remote northern reaches of Nepal's Dolakha district, Latte Apa was the son of the renowned Kote Guru. Throughout his childhood, he followed his father from ritual to ritual, where his responsibilities as ritual assistant included keeping incense lit, collecting the various types of leaves on which offerings were made, and making a range of ritually

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<sup>32</sup> Interviews with Latte Apa were conducted on multiple field trips to Darjeeling between March 2000 and October 2006.

required breads and effigies out of rice and wheat flour. When he was eight, his mother died, and his father remarried. He dates the onset of his shamanic visions to this event, and relates the culmination of his divine initiation to his father's death a few years later:

I was very upset by my mother's death, and started shaking uncontrollably. This was at the time of the new moon, so it was very dark. But two fireflies shined in my eyes, and I walked everywhere like a 'zombie', even up on high ridges. I went completely crazy for about six months. I crossed the Tamakosi river in monsoon season, even though everyone said I would drown. But nothing happened—it was like I was sleep-walking. During this time, I started having visions and learning things from the ancestors, just like that. My father died some time after all this began. On the night of my father's death, I sat with the senior gurus all night. I heard a sound like glass breaking, and then everything became clear. From that evening onwards, I received 'training' every night in my dreams. The deities taught me the ritual chants 'line by line'. I learned most of what I know now in the first six months of 'training', but continued learning every night for three years.

As in Rana Bahadur's experience, Latte Apa's shamanic beginnings were linked to his father's end. For the former, his father's death was a catalyst that compelled him to consider seriously the importance of ritual practice for the first time, while for the latter, it precipitated his direct initiation into a lineage of ritual practitioners following in his father's footsteps.

Also like Rana Bahadur, Latte Apa first traveled to India at the age of 20, having already crossed the mountainous Nepal-Tibet border—located no more than 10 miles from his village as the crow flies—regularly as a teenager to trade grain for salt. As the oldest son

of two deceased parents, Latte Apa found himself in a situation all too common in Thangmi villages:

I went to India because I had three generations of debt on my shoulders, and there was no way I could pay. I already had to pay high taxes [in kind] on the land I worked, as well as paying for crop seeds out of my own pocket. The situation was unbearable, so I left.

Latte Apa made the journey from Alampu to Darjeeling in 1957 in the company of five friends, and upon arrival enlisted in the Indian Army as a member of their “support staff” (see Chapter 4). After finding himself in several life-threatening circumstances during the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict, during which he was posted along the border in Arunachal Pradesh, he decided to leave the army. He returned to Darjeeling, where he began working as a porter, but his reputation as an accomplished guru spread quickly enough among Darjeeling’s migrant Thangmi community that he could soon make his living exclusively from the donations he received in cash and kind in exchange for his ritual services.

Although only 20 when he first went to India, Latte Apa already had a wife and two small sons in Alampu. For him, the choice of whether to stay in Darjeeling or return to his young family in Nepal was a difficult one. There were only a small number of knowledgeable Thangmi gurus in Darjeeling at that time, and it was clear to Latte Apa that he could establish himself successfully and rise to prominence in a way that would be nearly impossible back in the Thangmi cultural

stronghold of Alampu, where there were almost too many gurus already. But his family was waiting for him, and he could have the best of both worlds by joining several of his village friends in the annual circular migrations: spending half the year working in Darjeeling, then returning to his family in Nepal with cash in hand to pay off debt and make the necessary household purchases. After leaving the army and spending several months in Darjeeling, he decided to return to Nepal once to see how the situation stood. He arrived to find that his wife had taken their children and moved in with another man in his absence, and that a neighbor had encroached on his land. There was no longer any doubt in his mind that Darjeeling held a rosier future, and after staying in Alampu for two days, he headed east again.

That was over 40 years ago, and to date Latte Apa has never returned to Nepal. However, his reputation is well-known throughout the transnational Thangmi community, and during my fieldwork, he often received visits from aspiring Thangmi gurus who had come from Nepal to seek guidance. It was a source of great pride to Latte Apa that despite the abundance of Thangmi guru in Nepal, young gurus traveled all the way to Darjeeling to consult him. Latte Apa counted every such visit as a chance to promote his own style of practice, emphasizing to his disciples that the power of Thangmi identity is maintained through the orally transmitted knowledge of its origin. Latte Apa never missed an opportunity to influence young gurus who might add some of Latte Apa's stylistic flourishes to their ritual repertoire. In this way, Latte Apa



became a transnational icon of sorts to both gurus and activists, embodying much of Thangmi history and culture through his own life experience and mastery of the ritual world. Whatever the deities might have preferred, his own ego did not resist such objectification, and the walls of his small clapboard house were a montage of publications, VCD and CD covers, certificates, and photos which demonstrated beyond argument his standing as *the* icon of Thangmi originary power. In this way, it was perhaps in the person of Latte Apa that the strategies of divine and political recognition most visibly converged.

These brief portraits of Rana Bahadur and Latte Apa show how both gurus' lives—like those of most lay Thangmi—have been influenced by the experiences of migration and extended residence in both Nepal and India, as well as short-term visits to what is now China's Tibetan Autonomous Region. As these gurus move, they take their existing knowledge with them, share it with others, and add new elements to their repertoires. In this sense, the practices that I describe below as constitutive of Thangmi culture are not static structures orchestrated in exactly the same way by each guru in each location, but rather dynamic processes that are continually transformed by individual innovation, as well as through interaction with broader cultural, political, and scholarly discourses and practices wherever Thangmi live.

### *Guru Paloke: Origin Myths and Ethnic Classification*

The Thangmi origin myth is chanted at the beginning of almost every Thangmi cultural occasion. Although each guru recounts it in a distinctive style, the basic mythic schemas remain consistent. It is the shared recognition of these narrative elements, and their relationship to sacred origins, that defines belonging in the Thangmi universe at the most fundamental level. The narrative of the world's creation, and the ensuing genesis of the Thangmi as a people emphasizes several themes integral to Thangmi identity: their peripheral position vis-à-vis other ethnic groups; the synthetic nature of their ethnic subjectivity; and their simultaneous attachment to specific territories and movement across them. Most Thangmi laypeople—regardless of their background or place of residence—can narrate at least the basic elements of the origin myth, and knowledge of it is an important marker of membership in the Thangmi cultural fold. It is in this sense that myth acts both as the anchor for Thangmi originality at the subjective level in the context of practice, and as a charter in the functional sense in the context of performance.

Thangmi origin myths are generally recounted by guru as part of a broader form of practice known as *paloke* (T). This term refers to both the full range of propitiation chants (often classed into sub-categories depending upon the type of deities for which they are intended, such as *suchi paloke* and *deva paloke*) which contain components of the origin myth, the ritual contexts within which these

recitations occur, and the ritual language in which they are encoded.<sup>33</sup> Over the course of my research, I found it difficult to understand the limits of the concept or the full range of its specific instantiations. When I asked gurus directly what *paloke* meant, I got a range of answers, such as, “It is everything gurus say”, “It is the melody (N: *bhakha*) with which we call the deities”,<sup>34</sup> “It is the story (N: *katha*) the deities give us to tell our children about where we came from”, “It is the particular way (N: *lawaj*) Thangmi speak”. Activists make their own attempts at pinpointing the concept as “the oral history of the Thami” (Niko 2003: 46); “ritual language of the gurus” (Reng 1999: 16); “the history of the Thangmi” (Niko 2003: 42); and “sayings of the Thangmi guru, our famous oral texts” (Samudaya 2061 [2056]: 97). I eventually gave up seeking a single, concise definition of the term, but *paloke* seems best explained as an oral tradition encoded in a ritual register of the Thangmi language that establishes the basis for a shared sense of Thangminess by pointing towards sacred origins.

Given the multiple ways in which elements of the *paloke* manifested in a range of contexts, it is very difficult to present a coherent version as recorded in a single practice event. In addition, each guru’s *paloke* is distinctive in style, and, as described above, this

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<sup>33</sup> *Paloke* may be compared with the Kirant *muddum*, which Gaenszle describes as “a central and highly complex notion whose meanings ... may be glossed as ‘oral tradition’, ‘ancestral knowledge’, or – more generally – ‘traditional way of life’” (Gaenszle 2002: 31).

<sup>34</sup> According to Turner (1997 [1931]: 473), the term *bhakha* is derived from the Sanskrit *bhaka*, which can mean either the tune of a song, or a vow made in a god’s name. It is also etymologically linked to *bhasa*, which means “language”.

style is part of what constitutes each guru's individual power. I recorded several recitations of the *paloke* in practice, as well as eliciting performances and commentary on it from several gurus in as many locations over time.<sup>35</sup> Rana Bahadur's *paloke* provided perhaps the most lengthy and detailed version of the origin myth itself, so I have chosen to use it as the basis for what is presented here (parts of other gurus' *paloke* are presented elsewhere in the dissertation). As we will see below, elements of this narrative also resonate with a pan-Himalayan myth told by several other groups, including the Tamang (Holmberg 1989) and Mewahang Rai (Gaenszle 2000).<sup>36</sup> An abridged version of the first half of Rana Bahadur's account of the creation of the world and its inhabitants is as follows. The second half of the story, which deals with migration into contemporary Thangmi territory, is presented in Chapter 6.

In the beginning, there was only water. The gods held a meeting to decide how to develop this vast expanse. First they created a type of small insect, but these insects couldn't find a place to live since there was only water and no solid land. Consequently, the gods created fish which could live in the water. The insects took to living on the fins of the fish, which stuck far enough out of the water to allow the insects to breathe. The insects collected river grass and mixed it with mud in order to build dwellings on

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<sup>35</sup> Over the course of my research, I recorded full ritual recitations of the origin myth from six gurus in different locations, as well as multiple shorter narrative versions offered by gurus, activists, and laypeople. Each of the major Thangmi publications also contains its own version, some details of which are presented in this chapter. I hope to do a more systematic comparison of several oral renditions alongside published versions in the future.

<sup>36</sup> Lévi-Strauss used the term "pan-American myths" to describe those mythic schemas shared among multiple neighboring groups (1979:27), and it is in a similar sense that I use the term "pan-Himalayan".

the fins of the fish in each of the four directions: south, west, north, and east.

Then a lotus flower arose spontaneously out of the water, with the god Vishnu seated in the middle. Out of the four directions of the lotus flower came an army of ants. The ants killed all of the fish-dwelling insects and destroyed their houses. The ants took the mud that the insects had used for their dwellings and left, gathering another species of grass as they went. They mixed this with the mud to construct new houses. Then the snake deities arose. It was still dark, so the sun was created.

Eventually, the gods gathered together and decided to create people to populate this vast expanse. Mahadev first tried to make a person out of gold, then one out of silver, then one out of iron, and finally one out of copper. However, none of these metal humans could speak.

Then Vishnu joined Mahadev in the endeavor, and tried his hand at making people. He made 108 piles of wood and burned each pile down to ash. Then he mixed each pile of ash together with chicken shit, and both gods used this mixture to make a new person. Vishnu built the person from the head down to the waist, and Mahadev built it from the feet up.

The two halves were made separately and then joined together at the navel. Now the person was ready. The gods called out to it, saying, "Hey, human!". The first people they had made—those of metal—couldn't respond, but this one responded. Then the gods commanded the person to go and die, so it did.

A thousand years passed. During this time, the spirit roamed the earth. Eventually, it ended up near Mt. Kailash, where it entered the womb of a giant sacred cow to be reborn. The cow gestated for seven months, during which time she wandered to a place called Naroban. After another three months, three divine sons were born to the cow: Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwor.<sup>37</sup>

The mother cow then instructed her three sons to eat her flesh after she died. She died, and the sons cut her flesh into three portions, one for each son. The youngest son, Maheshwor, went to wash the intestines in the river. As he was washing the entrails, 12 *ved* (N), or sacred texts, fell out of them. Three of the *ved* were washed away by the river, but Maheshwor managed to salvage the other nine.

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<sup>37</sup> Mahadev and Maheshwor are both names for the Hindu deity Shiva.

While Maheshwor was away at the river, the two older brothers buried their pieces of meat in the ground. They did not want to commit the sacrilege of eating their own mother. But when Maheshwor returned, they lied to him, saying that they had already eaten their portions of meat, and urging him to eat his as well. So he ate it. Then the two older brothers revealed their lie and accused Maheshwor of eating their sacred mother. Maheshwor was so angry that he struck the oldest brother, Brahma, with the intestines he was carrying. The intestines wound around his neck and back, becoming the sacred thread of the Bahun. Brahma stole some of Maheshwor's *ved* and went south, carrying the stolen goods. He went to a place called Kasi [the Indian city of Banaras], and his lineage (N: *gotra*) became Kasi *gotra*.

Vishnu ran away to the other side of the ocean and became a king. He had no lineage. Carrying the remaining *ved*, Maheshwor went to the north, chanting *om mani padme hum*. He went all the way to Lhasa [the Tibetan capital] and his lineage became Lhasa *gotra*.

Back in the place where the mother cow's flesh had been hidden, a pond arose. There three groups of people spontaneously emerged: the Barosetu, which included the Bahun, Chhetri and Lama [ethnically Tibetan peoples, including Sherpa and Tamang], who were under the patronage of Brahma; the Narosetu, which included the Newar, Magar, and Thangmi, who were protected by Maheshwor, and the Karosetu, including the Kami, Sarki and Damai, whom Vishnu looked after.

Then out of the pond arose a god named Bali Raja, who was responsible for giving caste/ethnicity [N: *jat*] and language to each of these three groups. He said, "Now I will give you *jat*," along with which he gave them languages. To the Barosetu, he gave the *ved*, along with *om bhasa* [N: the language of *om*], and to the Karosetu he gave only an anvil and other tools for working with metal. To the Narosetu, from whom the Thangmi are descended, Bali Raja gave shamanic implements instead of books, language or tools: they received a golden drum, a golden ritual dagger, a golden plate, a golden water jug, and a golden lamp. These objects arose spontaneously in the hands of the Narosetu.

The Narosetu called on the gods in their three abodes of earth, water, and sky, crying, "Give us knowledge! We will always worship Narobhumi!" The gods of the four directions gave them knowledge and allowed them to stay in each of the four places.

The gods also demanded that the Narosetu make offerings to them on Buddha Jayanti.<sup>38</sup>

Up until this time, none of the people could speak. Bali Raja said, “I will divide you into 18 jat, and after I do this, I will give you food and language, too”. So they sat in prayer to Bali Raja.

He gave the Barosetu and Karosetu their jat. Then it was the Narosetu’s turn. There were three Narosetu brothers. The oldest brother then had five sons, who were named and associated with different jat as follows: the oldest brother Ya’apa became the Thangmi forefather, the next brother Ma’apa became the Limbu forefather, then Sa’apa became the Chepang forefather, Ka’apa became the Dhami forefather and Kanch’apa became the Rai forefather.

Then Bali Raja gave language to the 18 jat. He first gave language to the other 17 groups and by the time he got to the Thangmi forefather Ya’apa, there was nothing left. So Ya’apa had to pick up the leftover bits and pieces of all of the languages that the other groups had already received.

No one had any suffering or pain then. Everyone was happy. Then Bali Raja decided to give seeds to all of the 18 groups. Each group brought different kinds of containers to collect the seeds. The Sherpa came with a leather bag, the Bahun came with a cloth bag, and the Thangmi came last with a bamboo basket, but there was almost nothing left for them. This is how divisions were made between the receiving and non-receiving jat. The Thangmi fell in the non-receiving category.<sup>39</sup>

Eventually, Narosetu came to Thimi.<sup>40</sup> There he worshipped Bhume. Until then, Bichi Raj (an incarnation of Vishnu) had been King of Thimi. There were kings in all of the directions, but Bichi Raj was in the middle. One night, Bichi Raj’s queen had a dream. She dreamt that Bichi Raj cut down seven banana trees at the base. Bichi Raj interpreted her dream to mean that he would win over seven kingdoms. So he tied the queen up so she couldn’t sleep again and possibly have a conflicting dream. Bichi Raj did indeed win seven kingdoms, one of which was Thimi. In the process, he fought with Narosetu as well, and Narosetu was

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<sup>38</sup> The festival commemorating Buddha’s birth, and also the date on which Bhume Jatra is always held—the most important Thangmi calendrical ritual which honors the earth deity, Bhume, and its component animistic deities (see Chapter 6).

<sup>39</sup> Here, the Nepali terms *paune* and *napaune* are literally translated as “receiving” and “non-receiving”, but in the contemporary context it seems that “included” and “excluded” might be a more appropriate gloss.

<sup>40</sup> A Newar town located in the Kathmandu Valley, on the eastern outskirts of the contemporary city.

killed. Narosetu's five sons ran away. Ma'apa, Ka'apa and Sa'apa fled to the West, while Ya'apa and Kanch'apa fled together to the East.

Although the first sections of the myth necessarily describe the beginning of the world and the origins of human beings as a general category, the characters quickly become ethnicized. The narrative does not take for granted that the Thangmi are at the center of the world; to the contrary, it assumes that the Thangmi are peripheral, at the edge of every system of ethnic classification with which they are associated. Gurus such as Rana Bahadur and Latte Apa are acutely aware that their myth is one not of primeval emergence from a blank slate as “the people”, but rather a tale of fissure from existing groups, reconstituting themselves as a coherent entity, and then defining themselves in relation to others. With an origin myth that articulates such a relational view of ethnicity (Barth 1969), it is hardly surprising that Thangmi are concerned with seeking recognition—whether divine or political—of their claims to a very marginal and ill-defined niche. The tale is largely preoccupied with asserting a Thangmi view of the Himalayan ethnic field, which recognizes the importance of the two major cultural blocs that define it—what have often been problematically termed the Indic and the Tibetan (the limitations of which will be discussed below)—yet stakes out an alternate position affiliated with neither.

Several elements of Rana Bahadur's narrative and a Tamang myth of “caste origins” that Holmberg describes (2005 [1989]: 34–36) are



similar: a set of brothers who represent different ethnic groups eat the meat of their divine bovine mother; one brother throws the bovine entrails at the Bahun brother to create his sacred thread; somehow sacred texts emerge from the mother cow's stomach; and the Bahun brother steals his texts from the Kami brother. These aspects of the story give voice to a widespread distaste for the behavior of high caste Hindus among many of Nepal's ethnic groups, who feel oppressed by the rigid strictures of Hindu caste hierarchy, and maintain their own social orders external to it. Holmberg suggests that:

Although this Tamang mythic account of caste origins plays on Hindu constructions of order ... Tamang translate this material into a different idiom ... Tamang not only form a religious society that is their own but one that is ... governed by a symbology that runs counter to rationalized theories of much of the Hindu-Buddhist world (Holmberg 2005 [1989]: 37)

Much the same may be said of the Thangmi myth, which is clearly recounted as a demotic parody of trickery and exploitation at the hands of Bahuns, which many Thangmi feel they have suffered from over time. In fact, the Thangmi slang term for Bahun is *dong* (T), which means "intestines", a word often invoked to comic effect by Thangmi in front of Bahuns who do not understand what is being said.

Yet there is one crucial difference between the Tamang and Thangmi myths: the two narratives classify the ethnic affiliation of the brothers and their descendants differently. In the Tamang myth that Holmberg recounts, "When the sacred texts are divided, the Lama/Tamang receive an equal and separate corpus" [2005 [1989]:

37], and the Tamang constitute an entirely distinct group, structurally separate from the Bahun or Kami. In the Thangmi narrative, however, the Tamang are classed in the same category as the Bahun, Chhetri, and other peoples of Tibetan origin, precisely because they all receive religious texts, while the Thangmi are in an entirely separate category because they receive only shamanic implements, and have no textual tradition.

A three-line mythic joke, often told by both gurus and laypeople as a self-deprecating variation on the theme of origins, offers an additional commentary on the Thangmi lack of a literary tradition:

The Kami received their *ved* written on iron tools  
The Bahun and Chhetri had no *ved*, but stole them from the  
unwitting Kami  
The Thangmi ate their *ved*, so now we have only oral traditions!

In this saying, which never fails to provoke a laugh when told in Thangmi company, the Thangmi do indeed receive *ved* from the deities in addition to their shamanic implements, but because they are too late to get food from the gods, they later eat these religious texts to satisfy their hunger. Having ingested the *ved*, the Thangmi internalize all of their religious knowledge and are bound to maintaining it through oral transmission.

From the Thangmi perspective, then, the Buddhist Tamang are in an entirely different category, closer in affinity to the high-caste Hindu

Bahun and Chhetri than to themselves.<sup>41</sup> As Latte Apa once described the genetic position of the Thangmi in this ethnic family tree, in which groups are distinguished by their allegiance to textual versus oral authority, “We are the descendants of shamans”.<sup>42</sup> This sense of belonging to a lineage that derives its authority exclusively from the power of orally-transmitted practices, rather than from a textual canon, has constituted an essential component of Thangmi identity over time.

The theme of ingesting or otherwise losing one’s texts appears to be a common trope in origin myths across the Himalayas, and into Burma, Cambodia and Tibet. Citing Michael Oppitz’s comparative study of such myths (2006),<sup>43</sup> Gaenszle explains that, “there are various reasons why the script and the scriptures got lost: in some cases they were burnt, in others accidentally eaten, or they were lost in a gamble” (forthcoming: 8).<sup>44</sup> Gaenszle continues to surmise that, “This myth seems to point at a widespread feeling of embarrassment among oral cultures about not having a scriptural tradition (forthcoming: 8)”. Some

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<sup>41</sup> Thangmi individuals often invoke this part of the myth as evidence to prove that they are ethnically unrelated to the Tamang in the face of common misconceptions that the Thangmi are a Tamang sub-group. See discussion in Chapter 1.

<sup>42</sup> Original Nepali: *Hami jhankriko santan hau*.

<sup>43</sup> I have not been able to access the original Oppitz article.

<sup>44</sup> See also Deliege (1993) on dalit origin tales, and Samten Karmay’s account of a similar Tibetan tale regarding the link between religious texts and consumption: “It is said that in the tenth century three errant Nepalese wanderers found Bon-po texts in bSam-yas by accident, and as they were not interested in them exchanged them for food” (1998: 123). There are other apparent resonances between Thangmi ritual practice and the so-called Bon tradition, but there is not enough historical evidence to draw any conclusions about historical links between them. See note 20 above for more details.

Thangmi also describe their oral traditions as *thutur ved* (N), literally “oral texts” (Niko 2003: 41), using a term Gaenszle also notes as prevalent among the Mewahang Rai. However, in Gaenszle’s formulation, “the *thutur bed* [= *ved*] of the Rai has only one weakness: being an oral tradition, it is more vulnerable than the others, more susceptible to loss of memory ... the apparent superiority of the Great Traditions’ literacy makes these increasingly attractive” (2002: 34).<sup>45</sup> Here, I question the assumption that such myths can indicate only embarrassment or weakness. Although this is certainly part of the picture, such analyses tend to overlook the ways that agency may arise out of ambivalent circumstances (see Chapter 8), in the Thangmi case transforming the heightened awareness of exclusion from the so-called “great traditions” into a positive assertion of identity, the power of which is only questioned by those whose claim to it is tenuous. I suggest that for the Thangmi, orality has historically been viewed as a sign of originality, and therefore as a strength rather than as a weakness. While the Thangmi activists who now seek to scripturalize oral practices may share the desire for literacy that Gaenszle notes among the Mewahang, such activists face the paradox that

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<sup>45</sup> Transnational links between India and Nepal have been important for the Kirant communities whom Gaenszle describes, much as they have been for the Thangmi. Much of the early ethnic activism and scripturalization upon which contemporary Kirant activists in Nepal draw upon actually took place in Darjeeling in the colonial era (Gaenszle forthcoming: 10). This raises the question of whether the notions of “embarrassment” and “weakness” that he describes in relation to oral traditions emerged first in India, as they seem to have for the Thangmi. See Chapter 5.

scripturalization undermines the very basis from which their traditions derive their power as originally Thangmi.

The figure of the guru himself therefore remains important, even within activist representations that seek to appropriate his power. As explained at the beginning of this chapter, the singular reliance on guru for all ritual purposes, without deference to additional ritual specialists who represent the textual traditions of either Hinduism or Buddhism (both of whom would be readily available in most of the places that Thangmi live), set the Thangmi apart from other Himalayan ethnic groups—such as the Tamang—with whom they otherwise share a great deal. Holmberg suggests that, “multiple specialists are an integral part of all the religious systems of Tibeto–Burman speaking groups in the Himalayas” (2005 [1989]: 4, n. 3), providing a long list of ethnographic works that document the role of multiple specialists in the religious systems of Magar, Chantel, Gurung, Sunuwar, Sherpa, Tamang, Limbu, Rai, Newar, Lepcha, and Tibetan groups. The Thangmi are an exception to this rule, and Thangmi evoke this difference in a range of contexts to assert their uniqueness. This is not to say that Thangmi ritual practice makes no reference to Hindu and Buddhist traditions—such references are in fact integral to the synthetic nature of Thangmi religion—but that these elements are appropriated by Thangmi guru, who act as the agents of synthesis on their own oral terms, to create Thangmi *dharma* (N: religion) as a distinct entity that stands apart from either of the two literate traditions which dominate

both lay and academic conceptions of religion in the Himalayas. As Megh Raj puts it, “According to the *paloke*, the oral history of the Thami, guru apas are authorized religious personalities who can clearly differentiate between what is tradition and what was introduced later” (Niko 2003: 42). Indeed, as both gurus and activists argue, the Thangmi possess their own “total ritual system”, (Holmberg 2005[1989]: 6)—legitimated by the figure of the guru and his *paloke*—which despite lacking multiple ritual specialists, can be compared with other such systems in the Himalayas and beyond.<sup>46</sup>

#### *Oral and Textual Modes of Practice as Classifying Markers*

The segment of the origin myth presented above suggests an indigenous classification system in which people are categorized according to whether or not they maintain a textual tradition, offering an intriguing variation on the commonly used themes for classifying Himalayan groups. The narrative also provides some clues as to why the Thangmi have had trouble conforming to such classificatory

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<sup>46</sup> Some Thangmi activist factions, particularly in Nepal, have made a move to link “Thangmi *dharma*” to the category of “Kirant *dharma*”, which appeared as an official category in the 2001 Nepal census for the first time. Such activists argue that acceding to this category would give them stronger political standing, without requiring them to assimilate to one of the “great traditions” of Hinduism or Buddhism. Although “Kirant *dharma*” is still a broader category that is not specifically Thangmi, it does denote a primarily oral tradition. In response, some Kirant activists attempted to claim the Thangmi as part of their population within the ongoing politics of the census (Rai 1997, Rai 2041 VS), a turn of events which fomented a guru-led popular resistance within the Thangmi community in opposition to activist demands for lay people to identify themselves as practicing Kirant dharma. See additional details in Chapter 5.

regimes, with the result that they have evaded description and remained largely absent from scholarly and political discourses.

Both states and scholars have struggled to develop terminology at once clear and complex enough to cope with the vast cultural diversity of the Himalayan region. As described in Chapter 1, the 1854 Nepali legal code, or Muluki Ain, codified the position of many of the country's groups, incorporating them within the Hindu caste framework, while Indian colonial classification projects by contrast set up a clear dichotomy between caste and tribe. Early scholarly works promised to move beyond such distinctions, but that task has proven difficult. The 1978 edited volume *Himalayan Anthropology: The Indo-Tibetan Interface*, which contained a collection of essays by Western social scientists working in the region, proposed what became a remarkably enduring model for defining the Himalayan region as an "interface" between the two "great civilizations" of India and Tibet. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf summarized this model in the Foreword to the volume:

In the Valleys of this great mountain range Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman languages dovetail and overlap, populations of Caucasian racial features characteristic of North India met and merged with Mongoloid ethnic groups, and the two great Asian religions Hinduism and Buddhism coexist there and interact in various ways. In neither of these spheres are boundaries clear-cut, nor are the sequences of events which brought about the present kaleidoscopic pattern easily discernible. While chronological data relating to developments within the great historic civilizations of the area are fairly well established, very little is known about the history of the many preliterate tribal societies which for long filled the interstices between the domains of more advanced cultures...for centuries [this area] has

been a meeting point of distinct races and two of the great civilizations of Asia. (1978: ix–xii)

This model posits two Himalayan ideal types: the Indic, characterized as linguistically Indo–Aryan, racially Caucasian and religiously Hindu; and the Tibetan, characterized as linguistically Tibeto–Burman, racially Mongoloid and religiously Buddhist. The problem is how to classify all of the people who fit into neither category, inhabiting the “interstices” between them, which James Fisher describes with several colorful spatial metaphors in his introduction to the same volume: “fringe region”, “neither fish–nor–fowl contact zone” (1978: 1), and perhaps most intriguingly, a “zipper which stitches together these two densely textured cultural fabrics” (1978: 2). We are left to wonder whether there is any room left for those caught between the zipper’s teeth to forge their own sense of cultural distinctiveness using the “preliterate” tools at their disposal. In particular, it remains unclear how languages, races and religions might in fact blend to create paradigms for belonging, which although defined in relation to the Indic and the Tibetan types, do not aspire to be part of either one.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the shortcomings of these classificatory rubrics, both activist and state discourses have appropriated such scholarly

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<sup>47</sup> Further attempts to provide more nuanced classificatory terminology include Höfer’s “Tibetanid” and “Tibetanoid” to describe respectively peoples outside of historical/political Tibet whose linguistic and cultural practices are similar to those found inside Tibet, and those with higher levels of “Hinduization” but who still speak Tibeto–Burman languages (2004 [1979]: 43); Charles Ramble’s food-based “tshampa–eater” versus “rice–eater” to describe the Tibetan and Indic cultural paradigms (1993); and journalist C.K. Lal’s linguistically-defined “Hindu Aryan Nepali Speakers” or HANS to describe the dominant group in contrast to the rest.



descriptions in developing their own definitions of Himalayan populations, often drawing even sharper oppositions between the Indic and Tibetan paradigms than scholars originally did. In most cases, religion is taken as the key symbol in the set of oppositions, with *janajati* groups in Nepal and tribal groups in India defined foremost by their ostensibly non-Hindu character. For instance, the Nepal Federation for Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) defines a janajati group as:

that community who has its own mother tongue and traditional culture and yet does not fall under the conventional fourfold VARNA of the HINDU VARNA system or the Hindu hierarchical caste structure.<sup>48</sup>

In India, although the nation's secular constitution discourages definitions of difference on a religious basis, a tribal identity is presumed to be a non-Hindu one.<sup>49</sup> Some activists in Nepal, such as the members of the Mongoloid National Organization in Nepal described by Susan Hangen (2005a), seek to accord race primary symbolic value over religion. This approach has the benefit of acknowledging that while some groups may have altered their religious practices in response to what has been called Sanskritization (Srinivas 1989) or Hinduization (Fisher 2001), their racial characteristics continue to mark difference in a normative manner that religious

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<sup>48</sup>As found on the NEFIN website, accessed on November 4, 2008.  
<http://www.nefin.org.np/component/content/article/115-information/347-indigenous-nationalities-of-nepal>.

<sup>49</sup> See Middleton and Shneiderman (2008) for details.

practice no longer does.<sup>50</sup> Despite their divergence on this issue, both activist approaches to classification link the three characteristics of Tibeto–Burman language, Mongoloid race, and non–Hindu religion to define subaltern identities in a static manner vis-à-vis the supposedly dominant and oppressive Indo–Aryan linguistic, Caucasian racial and Hindu religious identity.<sup>51</sup>

Such categories are problematic for several reasons. At the linguistic level, the terms “Indo–Aryan” and “Tibeto–Burman” refer to language families, rather than contemporary spoken languages. Although most of Nepal’s over 100 languages are members of those two language families, one cannot be an Indo–Aryan or Tibeto–Burman speaker (Turin 2006b). In addition, speaking a language belonging to one or the other of these families does not on its own define racial, religious or ethnic identity: for example, many mother tongue Nepali speakers are Buddhists from Mongoloid racial backgrounds. At the level of race, although the Himalayas have indeed historically been the meeting ground for Caucasian populations originating in the south and

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<sup>50</sup> Discussions of Tibetanization (Samuel 1993, Huber 1999a) emerge from a very different perspective, which I have discussed in Shneiderman (2006).

<sup>51</sup> David Gellner suggests that: “There is a bitter irony in the fact ... that just when a scholarly and anthropological consensus is emerging that a Hindu–tribe dichotomy was hopelessly flawed as a tool for understanding Nepalese society, Nepalese intellectuals themselves should begin to take it up with a vengeance (1997: 22)”. However, I would argue that this was hardly ironic, but instead represented a consciously strategic move to gain concrete results from the state, which a decade later can be seen to have paid off (at least from activist perspectives) in the promises of ethnic autonomy, which were unimaginable in 1997 when Gellner wrote.

<sup>54</sup> According the Gaenszle, the Mewahang Rai also use these terms, although they make a “highly inconsistent distinction between *Lhasa gotra* and *Kasi gotra* groups” (2000: 356).

Mongoloid populations originating in the north, the contemporary ethnic groups that populate Nepal, as well as Indian Himalayan areas such as Darjeeling, are largely composites. In many cases, racial mixture is in fact the reality, even among elite families fixated on purity, as historian John Whelpton has recently shown for Nepal's now-deposed Shah kings (2005). Finally, at the level of religion, the boundaries between Hindu and Buddhist practice are rarely clear-cut. One often finds iconography belonging to both religious complexes in single temples, and individuals from a wide range of ethnic groups count themselves as devotees of both faiths, or engage in practices identified with both traditions. In short, while most Himalayan people can identify with some of the linguistic, racial and/or religious characteristics enshrined in the putative Indic and Tibetan paradigms, those characteristics do not always line up neatly in one column.

Such mixture is certainly part of the Thangmi story. In the portion of the myth recounted above, the Thangmi forefather does eventually receive language from Bali Raja, but it is not "pure", being instead a mixture of the other 17 languages. Linguistic research tells us that the Thangmi tongue is indeed a link between the Newar language and a group of Kiranti languages; like Newar, it is a Tibeto-Burman language with long-standing Indo-Aryan influences (Turin 2004a, 2006a). People who identify themselves as Thangmi possess a wide range of physical features ranging from stereotypically "Mongoloid" to stereotypically "Aryan" and everything in between. The

origin myth alludes to this racial diversity with its mention of Lhasa and Kasi *gotra*, two super-clans which are linked to these important cities to the north and the south respectively, and which are perceived as the source of Mongoloid and Aryan features.<sup>54</sup> (I have often heard Thangmi friends joke with each other about who belongs to Lhasa *gotra* and who belongs to Kasi *gotra* based on the shape of their nose.) These cities also metonymize the Hindu and Buddhist complexes from which many aspects of Thangmi dharma are appropriated: Brahma steals the *ved*, a Hindu text, and goes south to Kasi, while Maheswor heads north to Lhasa chanting *om mani padme hum*, a mantra of Buddhist origin.

The Thangmi myth offers an alternative to the hackneyed categories for classifying Himalayan groups described above: why not instead classify groups according to whether they emphasize an oral or textual mode of religious authority? Such a classificatory schema shifts attention away from essentialized notions of linguistic, racial, or religious content, and refocuses rather on what people actually *do*—identity as expressed in action. From this perspective, the historically exclusive Thangmi reliance on an orally transmitted shamanic tradition sets them apart from groups who adhere to either Hindu or Buddhist textually legitimated traditions, and aligns them with others for whom oral traditions remain primary, such as the Limbu, Chepang, and Rai, who are identified as the closest ethnic “brothers” of the Thangmi in

the myth.<sup>55</sup> Of course, there are aspects of both Hindu and Buddhist tradition that emphasize oral transmission as well as, or in some cases, instead of, textual authority, and a nuanced application of the classificatory schema outlined in the origin tale would have to locate practitioners of Hindu and Buddhist oral traditions in the same category as the Thangmi themselves. When I have raised this issue, most Thangmi guru consider it carefully, and then repeat that people must be classified according to what they actually do (N: *gareko anusar*). Such statements are made not only by gurus, but also by lay Thangmi. One man from Nepal who had worked extensively in India told me that he was perpetually frustrated when people asked, “Who [i.e. what other groups) are the Thangmi close to?” rather than “What do Thangmi do?”<sup>56</sup> He continued to tell me that it was impossible to explain Thangmi identity with reference to other groups, and that he wished he could instead “show” (he used the English word) his interlocutors what Thangmi ritual practice looked like.<sup>57</sup> These discussions highlight the importance of practice in defining identity from a Thangmi ontological perspective.

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<sup>55</sup> When asked which other Himalayan peoples they share the most with, most Thangmi assert a close connection to Rai groups. However, the Thangmi do not eat pork, while consumption of pork is a major identity marker for most Rai (and pig-raising is an important source of income).

<sup>56</sup> Original Nepali: *Thangmi ko sanga milchha?* versus *Thangmile ke garchha?*

<sup>57</sup> This is in fact an increasingly popular use of publications and videos—Thangmi living or working in multi-ethnic contexts use them to “show” others what Thangmi life is ostensibly like.

### *Synthetic Subjectivities and Inferior Complexities*

How can the Thangmi origin tale assert that the Thangmi are somehow fundamentally different from groups that identify themselves as Hindu or Buddhist, when Thangmi practice itself incorporates elements of both Hindu and Buddhist practice? The emphasis on practice and the resultant flexibility regarding ethnic and religious boundaries that I have described above helps solve this riddle. Thangmi self-definitions that openly acknowledge mixture—at linguistic, racial and religious levels—advance a critique of the standard Indic and Tibetan categories. As Gopilal, a prominent Dolakha Thangmi in his sixties who had been both an activist and an important ritual lineage holder (see Chapter 8), once commented with a wry laugh before launching into an informal rendition of the origin myth, “We are a hybrid (N: *thimbar*) group, from the moment of genesis onwards, that is how we became Thangmi”.<sup>58</sup> The Nepali term *thimbar* is derived from *thimaha*, which connotes hybridity in the biological sense and is used in agricultural contexts to describe the results of plant breeding.<sup>59</sup> Many Thangmi with whom I worked in Nepal had become familiar with the term through agricultural trainings sponsored by development organizations, and had adopted it to describe themselves, often in statements like Gopilal’s that demonstrated a self-reflexive sense of humor.

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<sup>58</sup> Original Nepali: “*Hami thimbar jat ho, utpatti dekhi tyasari Thangmi bhaeko*”.

<sup>59</sup> Sharma (2057 VS: 562).

Such self-conscious descriptions of mixture attest to a “synthetic subjectivity”: a conscious recognition of the synthesis of diverse linguistic, religious, racial and cultural elements that comprise Thangmi identity at the most fundamental, originary level.<sup>60</sup> This is not to say that Thangmi are in any way more hybrid or synthetic than any other group—Himalayan or otherwise—in empirical terms, but rather that they consciously recognize this mixture as part of what makes them who they are, rather than trying to submerge it in a narrative of ethnic purity as is more common. By vesting ritual authority in their guru, who do not claim to act as officiants of either pure Hinduism or Buddhism, but instead articulate Thangmi origins as explicitly synthetic, Thangmi historically located themselves outside the normative line of vision of state discourses which have relied upon clear religious identities as definitive markers of ethnic distinctiveness.

This emphasis on synthesis is one of the reasons why the Thangmi for so long remained invisible at the political level. Many contemporary Thangmi in both Nepal and India who would like to make claims on their respective states through the idiom of ethnic activism find the lack of definitional clarity that they encounter in their own myths of origin deeply disconcerting. The problem is not that such

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<sup>60</sup> In earlier formulations of this argument, I used the term “syncretic” rather than “synthetic”. I have opted for the latter since it denotes mixture in a much broader set of domains than the former, which is generally understood to reference only the religious. In addition, the concept of syncretism carries too much baggage to unpack effectively here. However, I wish to note that Shaw and Stewart’s definition of syncretism as “the politics of religious synthesis” (1994: 4) suggests a close articulation between the two, and I hope to explore the relationship between these terms in future work.

activists no longer possess synthetic subjectivity; to the contrary, they have become increasingly aware of it as they have sought to locate themselves within state discourses of recognition, often grappling intimately with the disjunctures they feel between their subjective awareness of synthesis as a key feature of Thangmi ethnicity, and the perceived political requirements for racial, religious, cultural and linguistic purity. In a sense, they desire a purely functional relationship with their origin myth as a straightforward, scientifically and historically logical charter, but instead they are constantly confronted with the messy, somewhat illogical nature of its symbolic schemas. Indeed, for political purposes as well as personal peace of mind, many Thangmi activists would like to find and put on display an “original” Thangmi prototype, clearly categorizable as a “Hindu” or “Buddhist” religious practitioner, an Indo–Aryan or Tibeto–Burman language speaker.<sup>61</sup> But even they must ultimately acknowledge that, “After careful study we find that the Thami rites are a combination of

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<sup>61</sup> Since Thangmi religion and language do in fact incorporate elements of both the Indic and Tibetan paradigms, and people who identify as Thangmi are physically heterogeneous, small but vocal activist factions have advocated assimilation to each of these paradigms in various times and places. Some of these historical moments are described in Chapter 5. Since 1990, both the *janajati* and tribal movements in Nepal and India respectively have defined themselves as explicitly non-Hindu, so that as Thangmi became increasingly invested in these paradigms they sought to downplay Hindu aspects of their synthetic practice. Some of these dynamics are described within the context of marriage and funerary rituals in Chapter 7. Since, however, the dominant activist paradigm for asserting Thangminess during my research was that of valorizing and appropriating the power of Thangmi guru themselves, I have not presented these alternative arguments in detail here. Tracing out the patterns of “Hinduization” / “Sanskritization” and “Buddhicization” / “Tibetanization” within the Thangmi community over time may be a direction for future research, but here I focus on the form of hyper-“Thangmification” that has emerged as the primary activist goal over the last decade.



Hinduism and Buddhism ... integrated in the guru system” (Reng 1999: 18). Synthetic subjectivity is not always an easy mental state to live with, and even those who might wish it otherwise must find ways to work with it. As Pnina Werbner has suggested, “intentional hybrids create an ironic double consciousness ... [which] are internally dialogical, fusing the unfusable” (1997: 5) in a manner that can be both productive and debilitating.<sup>62</sup>

Paras, whom we met at the beginning of this chapter, once explained to me in English, “We Thangmi have an inferior complexity.” Indeed, this slip of the tongue—Paras later explained that he meant “inferiority complex”, which was a term that he and other Thangmi activists used regularly in their writing and conversation—pinpoints the problem precisely.<sup>63</sup> Thangmi racial origins and linguistic and cultural practices, along with their resultant synthetic subjective state, are too complex to fit easily within common Himalayan and South Asian rubrics for classifying caste and ethnicity. This sense of not fitting in leads many Thangmi to feel at once inferior, and proud of their complexity. The balance between the two depends on the individual

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<sup>62</sup> A quotation from Stan Mumford suggests just how psychologically challenging maintaining synthetic subjectivity might be within the Himalayan social context: “most Tibetans ... thought that my dual project of receiving enlightenment from the lamas and also learning from the Gurung shamans would result in confusion or even insanity. The lamas thought me in danger of acquiring a divided mind...” (1989: 5).

<sup>63</sup> As Paras wrote in *Niko Bachinte*, “Our members will have these questions: who are the Thami, where did they come from, and so forth? Those who are smart enough to respond will have an answer for the questioner, but those who aren’t will be left without a reply and some of them will even suffer from an inferiority complex” (Niko 2003: 9). Similarly Rajen once explained to me that migrant Thangmi in Darjeeling did not participate in the BTWA’s activities because they had an “inferiority complex”.

and his or her personal experiences of the range of practices, performances, policies and places that shape Thangmi subjectivities.

*Struggles for Power: Between Orality and Literacy*

On one of my most recent trips to Dolakha, I watched a group of children who were playing in the dirt perk up their ears and listen in rapt attention as Silipitik, a respected village elder in his 70s (whose life story is told in Chapter 4), recounted the Thangmi origin myth. For individuals like Silipitik, both old and young, who are engaged in Thangmi linguistic and cultural practice on a day-to-day basis, the iterative process of telling and listening to the mythic narrative provides a powerful framework within which to interpret their own lives. In particular, the myth's "sociological schema" (Lévi-Strauss 1987 [1973]) inculcates a sense of pride in the racial, linguistic and cultural complexity that defines Thangminess by positing it as the basis for Thangmi "originality".

However, the very oral, embodied nature of originary power limits access to it for those who cannot understand the Thangmi language in which the myth is embedded, or who are not familiar with the ritual contexts in which it has historically been transmitted. For such individuals, the origin myth loses much of its interpretive power unless it can be entextualized in a manner that at once grants them access to, and control over, it. Access is achieved by decontextualizing the myth from the embodied ritual practice of the gurus' *paloke*,

translating it into Nepali or English, and encoding it in the written word. Control is then asserted by recontextualizing the narrative in a written form that very few guru have the literacy skills to understand or utilize. This desire to wield originary power is much of what compels activists like Paras to engage in the political production of identity with what can only be called religious fervor, even if they are not—or especially if they are not—involved in ritual practice in the traditional sense. For such activists, gaining recognition from the states in which they live becomes an existential battle in order to assuage their own sense of inferior complexity, which is exacerbated by their personal incompetence in the Thangmi linguistic and ritual domains within which the sacred power of identity has historically been produced.

After recounting the origin myth to his young audience, Silipitik turned to me to complain about the recent proliferation of Thangmi activist publications that he could not read, and to make the case for the importance of maintaining the oral transmission of Thangmi practice: “From the beginning, our ethnic group has not had writing and reading.”<sup>64</sup> His phrasing, which was echoed by many others of his generation, suggests that writing and reading are tangible items that a group or an individual can possess, and as such, from his perspective, are simply not part of the Thangmi cultural inventory. This assertion illustrates how the tension between guru and activist worldviews is one of a broader set of social differences within the Thangmi community

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<sup>64</sup> Original Nepali: *Aghi pahile dekhi lekhai padhai chhaina hamro jat.*

which are indexed by notions of orality and literacy. As Laura Ahearn has suggested, “literacy is not a neutral, unidimensional technology but rather a set of lived experiences that will differ from community to community” (2001: 7). Understanding how these dynamics work therefore requires a very brief history of education within the Thangmi context, which is expanded upon in Chapter 5.

There were no educational institutions in the areas of Nepal where Thangmi lived until the late 1940s, when the first primary school was built in what is now Suspa–Kshamawati VDC.<sup>65</sup> Although I do not have access to statistics from that era, based on oral histories it is fair to presume that most of students in this era were from Bahun, Chhetri or Newar families, and that very few Thangmi children were enrolled in school. I heard several stories about how Thangmi children were actively prevented from enrolling in school by high-caste teachers whose families acted as moneylenders to Thangmi families and saw the prospect of Thangmi literacy as a potential challenge to their domination in the area.<sup>66</sup> More information about what is often called the “semi-feudal” tenancy system in the area is provided in Chapter 4. Here, the point is that since non-literate Thangmi were exposed to writing primarily through the loan documents that were often used to appropriate their land, they tended to view writing as a technology of exploitation which “belonged” to high castes. For this reason, even

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<sup>65</sup> This school was founded by Nanda Prasad Prasain, a Nepali Congress activist (Dinesh Prasain, personal communication).

<sup>66</sup> Dipesh Kharel (2006) mentions similar stories in his Master’s thesis on Alampu.

when underground communist activists who began working in the Thangmi area in the late 1970s worked to dismantle some of these barriers to education and provide opportunities for them to gain literacy, many Thangmi were skeptical about whether learning this skill which they associated with oppression would genuinely benefit them. In an interview with me, Amrit Kumar Bohara, a prominent UML activist from the majority Thangmi village of Piskar (although not Thangmi himself) described the situation he encountered in Thangmi villages in the late 1970s:

Since by now there was a primary school in the village, we would call the Thangmi children to come to school. We had to plead with them to come to school. Otherwise they would not come, saying that they were Thangmi children and they had no use of education as it was meant for the rich ... They would say that they had to go work in the fields and there was no use learning to read and write.<sup>67</sup>

Such resistance to formal education eventually dissipated as more schools were built and the potential benefits of education became clearer, and increasing numbers of Thangmi children began attending school in the 1980s. Those individuals became part of the broader project of nationalist education in Nepal during the panchayat era, during which ethnic difference was cast as evidence of backwardness (Pigg 1992, Onta 1996c), while development was framed in terms of nationalist assimilation to the dominant Nepali-speaking, Hindu path to modernity (Pigg 1992, Ahearn 2001, Tamang 2002). A

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<sup>67</sup> See additional details on Bohara's influence in the area in Chapter 5.

government report shows that well into the first decade of Nepal's democracy only around 56% of Thangmi children were ever enrolled in school (HMG 1996: 23), with high drop out rates (especially for girls) with the result that only a very small number of Thangmi made it beyond primary school (HMG 1996: 42).<sup>68</sup>

Formal education levels for Thangmi in Nepal remain low today. The increasing numbers who have been to school at once gain tools to painstakingly climb the status ladder in mainstream Nepali society, and to critique Thangmi linguistic and cultural practice from an evolutionary perspective which casts oral traditions—particularly in any language other than Nepali—as “backwards” and incommensurable with a literate Nepali modernity. Although the situation is changing, Thangmi activists now in leadership positions were educated in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of them viewed the very orality of Thangmi practice as a problem, since it fostered erratic inconsistencies in contrast to what they perceived as the standardized nature of the textually-based great traditions. Although many of these individuals had grown up in Thangmi-speaking environments in which gurus were the preeminent community leaders, they felt that advancing educationally and economically within the Nepali national frame required a conscious move away from Thangmi linguistic and ritual practice. As Tek Raj, a youth leader within NTS told me, “The fact that

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<sup>68</sup> In this report, the Thangmi are always lumped together with the Chepang and Jirel as one category (“Thami/Chepang/Jirel”). It is never explained why they are grouped together or how the data might be disaggregated.

we have only oral traditions is very embarrassing to us, and we want to change that for future generations". Another young writer from Dolakha, Ram Kaji, suggested that, "To solve all of our problems, we must write a book ... on the practices of the Thami which will be acceptable to Thamis scattered all over the world so that they can follow the same tradition" (Samudaya 2061 [2056] VS: 26).

These ideas converged with those of Darjeeling-based Thangmi activists, who had been educated in the post-colonial secular Indian context in which Nepali itself was a minority language, and ritualized practices were seen as anti-modern. In Darjeeling, education was much more accessible than in Nepal, and the Thangmi organization even opened its own primary school in 1945 (see Chapter 5 for details). Unlike their counterparts in Nepal, however, most Thangmi activists in India had little personal experience of the Thangmi language or ritual practice. Although they were eager to collect and understand Thangmi origin myths and ritual knowledge, they were frustrated to find that these existed only in oral forms embedded in the practice of gurus, who resisted the scripturalization of their knowledge—a problem which activists in Nepal also encountered.

There were several reasons for this resistance. First, the senior gurus were from an older generation to whom writing signified exploitative power, and second, very few of them were literate themselves, and thus may have felt threatened by this unfamiliar technique of objectification which could challenge their own ritual one.

There are also younger gurus, however, many of whom have completed primary school and do not share the older generation's visceral fear of writing, yet such young gurus still feel strongly that their *paloke* should not be written down or standardized in a single book. This is because, most importantly, from a guru's perspective—regardless of his age—the oral recitation and transmission of the *paloke* is what makes these chants distinctively Thangmi, and therefore gives them originary power. The essential orality of their practice is viewed as the immutable outcome of the actions of the Thangmi ancestors, who due to extreme hunger swallowed the religious texts granted to them by the deities at the point of creation. As Guru Maila of Suspa once explained, "Having swallowed our texts, we must practice our traditions from our *man* (N)".<sup>69</sup> The concept of *man* is a complicated one, but here the implication is of an internal, non-intellectual, non-discursive embodied essence, in which the stuff of Thangminess resides.<sup>70</sup> Once the texts were consumed, they became indelibly imprinted on the collective Thangmi *man*, and contemporary Thangmi guru are bound to live out that fate by maintaining the oral, embodied nature of Thangmi practice.

For this reason, Thangmi guru are unable to extract what first appeared to me as the discursive aspect of their *paloke* from the embodied expression of it. Early in my fieldwork, I would ask guru to

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<sup>69</sup> Original Nepali: *Ved nilepachi hamro man bata chalan chalnuparchha*.

<sup>70</sup> See Kohrt and Harper (2008), as well as McHugh (2001) and Desjarlais (2003) for more detailed descriptions of how the concept of *man* is conceptualized across Nepal and the Himalayas.



simply narrate the content of their chants without going into trance or engaging in other aspects of the complete practice, but these requests were met with disdain and the response that the words and the bodily practice—text and context, in other words—were inseparable, mutually dependent parts of a whole. Rana Bahadur’s assertions that if I wanted to record any of his knowledge, I had to be willing to document *all* of it (as described in Chapter 1), were evidence of the same sort of totalizing mythical thinking. Several gurus with whom I developed close relationships were eventually willing to “stage” their *paloke* in the sense that they could perform them in non-practice contexts outside the framework of the life cycle, calendrical, or curative rituals in which they would usually be enacted (for instance in my living room in Kathmandu), but such performances still required all of the usual ritual offerings, and the guru still went into trance. None of the gurus with whom I worked with could recite just a single component of the *paloke* without chanting the entire “line”, nor could they recite this without going into trance, nor switch back and forth between recitation and explanatory commentary.<sup>71</sup> The *paloke* really were embedded in the consciousness of gurus as a totality, and were not meant to be read by others as “texts” in the hermeneutical sense. The content of the *paloke* therefore could not be extracted in easily entextualizable pieces, either by me or by Thangmi activists.

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<sup>71</sup> This fact encouraged me to use video as an ethnographic method, where I could first record a guru in practice, and later elicit commentary on his actions.

To many activists, however, the total control that this gave guru over originary power itself was unacceptable. Activist objectives were two-fold: to write down the components of myth and practice so that they could be made easily accessible in written form both to interested Thangmi and to the political authorities involved in the processes of official recognition, and, through the techniques of scientific thinking, to standardize the diversity of individual gurus' practice into a single, authoritative and canonical text. Their ongoing attempts to meet these goals resulted in a power struggle, which Paras alluded obliquely to with the assertion that:

The demand that the ethnicity's pure identity should be recorded in writing has been in place for a long time, as it is not sufficient to have it in the verbal form alone. However, due to time and circumstances, this demand has not been implemented. (Niko 2003: 8).

This was not entirely true, since by the time that Paras wrote, Thangmi activists based in Nepal had already published three volumes (*Nan Ni Patuko*, *Dolakha Reng*, and *Thami Samudaya*), all of which contained some information about guru and their *paloke*. However, the Nepal-based activists had apparently encountered the same difficulties in entextualizing gurus' knowledge, as demonstrated by Khumbalal's allegations that gurus were hoarding power and leading the Thangmi down an erroneous path:

Our guru apa recite spiritual mantras which they make up, but these are not written.<sup>72</sup> The same mantra is passed to his followers in oral, not written form ... In order to preserve his power, the guru never teaches his mantra to others. Since the beginning, our community's gurus have taken their mantra with them when they die. Now, how many mantras have these gurus have taken with them from ancient times until the present? Since they are not written, the modern generation is forced to suffer to obtain their various practices and mantras...As the practices are done differently by each guru apa, it seems that their traditional practices cannot be correct.... We have no way of knowing if the so-called "guru" in his state of intoxication is pronouncing his mantra correctly or not, or whether he is just making up the sentences, which he has actually forgotten. We don't have written *ved* to prove it. If we did have them [*ved*] we could correct [the guru], saying, "Here is a mistake, here you have left it unfinished." Not all gurus are like this, but some have hoarded power and tried to dominate our community.

To solve these problems, the gurus, the intellectuals, and experienced members of the community should sit together and correct our practices. These must be published in a book, with which gurus should train students, and just like other pandit, monks, priest or mullah, they should try to produce many gurus. (Samudaya 2061 [2056]: 41–42)

This damning indictment of gurus themselves comes from the same writer who, as cited earlier in this chapter, eulogized the guru as the symbol of Thangmi originality—the only religious practitioner that Thangmi children should know. Khumbalal considered himself one of the intellectuals invoked at the end of the paragraph, and for him the real problem was that despite his highly educated and advanced economic status (he held an Indian college degree and ran a successful restaurant franchise in Kathmandu), he still had “no way of knowing” what was really at the root of Thangmi originary power, embedded as it

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<sup>72</sup> Here Khumbalal appears to be using the term “mantra” as a more familiar (to non-Thangmi speakers) synonym for *paloke*.

was in the bewildering complexity of oral practice controlled by guru. Through the technology of writing, he and others like him sought to bring their access to ritual power into line with their already established claims to economic and social power.

For self-proclaimed “intellectuals” like Khumbalal, this was a highly emotive issue, because despite all of the promises of a better future through education made in both Nepali and Indian nationalist discourses, in the end, being *padhai-lekhai* (educated, in the sense of being able to read and write) did not in itself grant access to power within the Thangmi community, or to the authority to define Thangmi identity through discursive representation. Being educated in Nepali, Hindi, and/or English did indeed allow one to attain higher status outside of the Thangmi community, which was certainly one of the necessary tools in campaigns for recognition, and a role that individuals like Paras and Khumbalal played well. But education on its own did not establish authority within the Thangmi community itself, where status was judged not by the quantitative terms of educational and economic success alone, but also by the qualitative terms of one’s relationship with the sacred originary. Both, in fact, were important, but in many people’s eyes, educational and economic success were relatively meaningless in terms of establishing status *as a Thangmi* if one did not also have a strong relationship with the sacred originary.

The concept of *padhai-lekhai* was not so much a literal assessment of one’s educational or class status, then, but rather a

symbolic statement of which kind of power one chose to prioritize. When Sher Bahadur, a middle-aged man in Dolakha who was literate and extensively involved in community-based development projects said, “Those educated Thangmi don’t care about other Thangmi, after they’ve reached the top they don’t come back here”,<sup>73</sup> it was both a way of distancing himself from this category of people whom he accused of taking advantage of others, and discrediting their particular form of power by suggesting that once one leaves the village for educational or economic advancement, one is no longer fully Thangmi. In a similar way, the Darjeeling activist Nathu’s statement that, “Those who are educated don’t respect the ‘cultural’”<sup>74</sup> was a way of contrasting the two approaches towards power, and situating himself somewhere in the middle, as someone with no formal education, who nonetheless held a government job and was economically successful, but who sided with the gurus in arguing against scripturalization. Speaking from the other side of the fence, as someone who prided himself on his education and felt personally affronted by Latte Apa’s hold on power, the BTWA general secretary Rajen told me that, “There are two ‘standards’ [of Thangmi]: the ‘low-level’ type and the type with ‘education’. As of yet, we’ve been unable to unify the two”. Rajen squarely placed the blame for this divide on the shoulders of those he called ‘low-level’—by which he meant circular migrants from Nepal—

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<sup>73</sup> Original Nepali: *Padhai-lekhai Thangmi harule Thangmi lai wasta gardaina, mathi gaera yata tira aundaina.*

<sup>74</sup> Original Nepali: *Padhai-lekhai harule ‘cultural’ mandaina.*

although these were precisely the people from whom he solicited cultural information for BTWA publications and performances, as well as linguistic data for the dictionary of the Thangmi language that he compiled.

Demonstrating that these power struggles remain a potent dynamic, Bhaba, the former general secretary of NTS, sent an email just as I was finishing this dissertation, in which he bitterly lamented the fact that, “a few so called Buddhijibee Thamis ... planned to sideline the genuine Thamis” (October 23, 2008) in order to control the future direction of the NTS. The term *buddhijibi* means “intellectual”, and the irony here is that although Bhaba himself is one of the most highly educated Thangmi anywhere, having attended the prestigious Buddhanilkantha School and completed his secondary education in England, he aligns himself with the “genuine Thamis” in opposition to the “intellectuals”. From his statements in several other interviews and conversations, it is clear to me that this is because Bhaba is himself a speaker of Thangmi who continues to view guru as primary ritual practitioners, and therefore he does not prioritize scripturalization as an activist goal, choosing to focus instead on the basic development needs of the community.<sup>75</sup> This suggests that *buddhijibi*, like *padhai-lekhai*, does not index educational status alone, but rather a broader

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<sup>75</sup> The ensuing content of the email suggests that Bhaba defines “genuine” by residence in a rural village in Sindhupalchok, Ramechhap, or Dolakha—where he himself was born and his parents still live—despite the fact that he has lived in Kathmandu since he was a third-grader in boarding school, and that several of the so-called intellectuals that he critiques share that background.

worldview about what it means to be Thangmi. These terms are in fact used derogatorily by those who do not identify with them to call into question the authenticity of others' Thangminess—often precisely those who are most engaged in establishing that Thangminess at a political level through the power of publication and performance. The implication is that activists who must rely on such literate strategies of representation alone (often because education has distanced them from Thangmi linguistic and cultural practice) cannot be fully Thangmi because they do not recognize the essentially oral nature of Thangmi originary power.

Even those who do identify themselves proudly as “intellectuals” acknowledge that they cannot carry the Thangmi banner alone. Despite his strong critique of gurus, Khumbalal's statement still calls for them to work with the “intellectuals” and “experienced members of society” in order to ensure the community's future. From the other side, Latte Apa still goes to the BTWA office in Darjeeling bazaar every few days to find out if there is any news of the Thangmi Scheduled Tribe application, or upcoming cultural events to squeeze into his busy ritual schedule. In short, neither mode of power is genuine to the exclusion of others; the sense of recognition that activists receive in response to the textual power that they wield is no less real than that which gurus (and those who employ them) receive in response to the oral power that they embody. Both forms of power derive from mutually constitutive processes of objectification—*sakali* and *nakali*—which

articulate relationships with the originary for some members of the Thangmi ethnic totality.

*Radio and VCD as Unifying Forces?*

Gaenszle suggests that the emergence of non-literate technologies for recording oral traditions, such as cassettes, video, CDs and VCDs, has among Kiranti communities “led the younger generation ... to increasingly revalue the oral forms” (forthcoming: 17). In the Thangmi context as well, such forms of entextualization that do not rely upon the written word seem poised to mediate between the oral and literate worldviews that I have described here. For instance, guru in both Darjeeling and Nepal who resisted having their *palo* written down not only allowed themselves to be videotaped by me (or “videoalized” by Thangmi activists), but in fact often sought me out to request that I document a particular ritual event. They were then very pleased when I gave VCD versions of these recordings back to them, and these discs became regular viewing on neighborhood video decks. Similarly, Latte Apa gave his permission to BTWA activists to sell copies of a 4-CD set of his *palo* in order to raise funds, but he still refused to give them permission to transcribe its contents. Audio and video recordings seemed to facilitate a compromise between the two groups’ agendas: they allowed guru to maintain their power since there could be no recording without their practice, but they simultaneously allowed that



power to be circulated among a broader public—including government agencies—without requiring the guru to actually be present.

Another medium with potentially similar effects is that of radio, which is rapidly coming to play an important role for Thangmi in Nepal.<sup>76</sup> Since 2007, NTS members have received funding from NFDIN for a Thangmi language radio show called Thangmi Wakhe—“Thangmi Talk”—which has been broadcast on several community radio stations.<sup>77</sup> The host is Tek Raj, the young activist-journalist who had told me that he found the exclusive orality of Thangmi traditions “embarrassing”. Guests include activists, gurus and other Thangmi individuals, all of whom are invited to express their views on matters of interest to the community. I had the opportunity to listen to several broadcasts in the company of Thangmi friends, and was struck by their emotional response to, “hearing the radio speak in our own language”, as one of them put it.

I accepted the invitation when Tek Raj invited me for an interview on the program, and after our brief on-air conversation we sat down for a cup of tea in the back room of the studio. He had a whole list of questions for me, which were much more contentious than the fairly innocuous ones he had asked during our formal interview. In particular, he wanted to know what I thought about the relative value of what he called *maukhik* (N) and *likhit* (N)—oral and textual—forms

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<sup>76</sup> See Onta (2006) on the remarkable success of community radio in Nepal in general.

<sup>77</sup> There is also a Thangmi language radio program run by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) in Dolakha district. I have not had the opportunity to listen to its broadcasts yet.

of knowledge production—what I have described as the modes of power used by gurus and activists respectively to establish their relationships with the sacred originary. He was clearly personally troubled by the tensions he felt between these competing forms of power within the community. This discomfort was hardly surprising, since he was an ambitious man in his mid-twenties who had grown up speaking Thangmi fluently in a Dolakha village that fell within the sphere of influence of a popular guru, but held a BA in journalism and was now employed by a mainstream media house in Kathmandu. The Thangmi language radio show which he produced in his free time was obviously his passion, but still he was concerned that somehow the oral form that it took was somehow worth less than the printed articles he wrote in Nepali for his day job. “It’s not ‘long-lasting’,” he said to me of the radio broadcasts, “I put so much time into it and then it’s gone.” I suggested that this ephemeral quality might be part of what gave a live broadcast its power, just as a guru’s power was embedded in his actual practice.

A light bulb seemed to go off in Tek Raj’s head as he jumped out of his chair. “Are you saying that my radio show is like a guru’s *paloke*, powerful precisely because it is oral?” I nodded. He continued, talking a mile a minute, “And that in fact this orality is our Thangmi originality?”<sup>78</sup> “I think so,” I said, “But that doesn’t mean it’s true”. In

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<sup>78</sup> Original Nepali: “*Sachai yastai maukhik kura hamro Thangmi maulikta ho?*” Robert Desjarlais (2003) provides a useful explanation of the very flexible Nepali term *kura*, which although often translated as “things”, also has the implication of “traditions” or “cultural possessions”.

that moment, Tek Raj seemed to grasp the contours of the totality that bound him—a well-educated and proudly modern young Thangmi—together with the largely non-literate gurus whose practices he had once termed embarrassing, along with every other Thangmi individual.

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**Circular Lives: Histories and Economies of**  
**Belonging in the Transnational Thangmi Village**

*Kumaiko ghumai, Chhetriko jal, Newarko lekhai, Thangmiko kal.*  
“The Kumai’s treachery, the Chhetri’s trap, the Newar’s forgery, the Thangmi’s scalp”.

– Proverb heard in Thangmi areas of Nepal<sup>1</sup>

*Chiyako botma sun phulchha.*

“Gold blooms on the tea bush”.

– Popular Nepali saying about Darjeeling

*The Missing Bampa*

“I think you are ready to visit Khaldo Hotel,” Rana Bahadur said to me conspiratorially one day in 2004 at the very end of my first extended stay in Darjeeling. Over the past several months, my eyes had often rested on the seemingly endless hotel signboards that dotted the bazaar’s steep lanes. There were the colonial curlicues of the Windamere at the top of Observatory Hill, the fruity-colored hues of the Amba Palace down in the center of town, and the Lunar Hotel’s long, narrow sign atop a high Clubside building, pointing skyward towards its namesake. But Khaldo Hotel did not sound familiar. “What’s that?” I asked. “You know, you keep asking where the Thangmi laborers who come every year from Nepal stay. I’m trying to tell you that they stay at Khaldo Hotel.” This revelation provoked both curiosity and frustration in me. In spite of the congenial roadside friendships I

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Tanka Subba for suggesting this particular English translation of the Nepali. A more literal translation might read: “The Kumai’s run around, the Chhetri’s net, the Newar’s writing, the Thangmi’s death”.

had struck up with many of the migrant Thangmi porters who spent their days outside looking for work, I had not yet been invited to their homes—an experience that diverged sharply from what I had come to expect from my work with other groups of Thangmi in both Nepal and India—and I had been unable to solve the mystery of where they all went at night. So I swallowed my irritation and followed Rana Bahadur down the hill.

As we came to a busy intersection that I had walked through many times before, he crossed the road and ducked under a low metal archway that appeared to lead into a standard concrete multiplex building. But instead of heading up the stairs straight ahead of us, he ducked again into an opening so low that I had trouble getting through the entry way with my large backpack. We entered a tunnel-like passageway of the same height. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I shivered—it was several degrees colder in here, and very moist—and focused on the point of light coming from Rana Bahadur's cigarette lighter. After turning a few corners, I started to hear voices, and soon we came upon a family of four sitting in front of a wood-burning fireplace etched into the concrete floor. The woman was making tea and nursing a baby, while the man arranged some bags stuffed into a corner. An older child darted back and forth between his two parents. I was relieved when Rana Bahadur sat down by the fire and indicated to me to do the same, since the ceiling was not more than four feet above the floor and I was uncomfortably hunched over. "Welcome to Khaldo

Hotel,” Rana Bahadur said with a smile, and introduced me to the couple. “They are the proprietors here, you see. They rent this whole place every year”—he gestured further into the darkness—“and rent out rooms to the rest of them for fifty rupees a month”. With the smile fading into a wry grin, he continued, “It’s a ‘full-service hotel’, you see, with meals, laundry, and any other facilities you need included”.

I quickly realized that *khaldo* (N) meant “hole in the ground”, and that the appropriately named “hotel” was in fact a subterranean warren of rooms in a defunct portion of Darjeeling’s colonial sewer system.<sup>2</sup> A corrupt government official managed to collect rent on the whole place from the Thangmi couple with whom we now sat. They were, in turn, somewhere in the middle of the pyramid scheme, collecting rent from approximately 150 Thangmi of all ages who spent the cold winter months living underground in a windowless cave where they could hardly stand up. Nonetheless, upon their return to Nepal, these tenants talked up the joys of Khaldo Hotel to would-be migrants back home. This year’s residents were promised a free meal next year for every new renter they brought in.

Could the meager take-home earnings really be worth the privations of half a year, every year, spent in Khaldo Hotel? Why did so many migrants continue to stay here every year rather than finding more pleasant, permanent places to settle in Darjeeling, as small but

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<sup>2</sup> Turner defines *khaldo* as “hollow, hole, pit, depression; ravine” (1997 [1931]: 121).

significant numbers of Thangmi had been doing since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century? Was there a more complex dynamic of exploitation and aspiration, social exclusion and belonging, attachment to territory and desire to leave it, at play? I recalled the images of sweatshop labor and social mobility that characterized Ellis Island-era America and other well-trodden migrant routes all over the world, and my image of Darjeeling as a land of opportunity where Thangmi came from Nepal for easy economic benefit took a turn towards the more complicated.

Khaldo Hotel's dingy concrete walls could not be more different from the Thangmi houses of stone, mud, wood, thatch, and the occasional corrugated aluminum roof dotted across the rugged green hills of Nepal's Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts [see Figures 4.1 and 4.2]. As one of the country's poorest and most socially excluded groups by any standard,<sup>3</sup> most Thangmi survive on small pieces of property which yield barely enough grain to feed families for less than half the year. Despite their limited resources, Thangmi villagers tend to take pride in their houses, seeing them as the embodiment of their attachment to the territory on which they live. Houses are the physical manifestation of their inhabitants' clan lineages; clan identification is often defined in terms of household, rather than individual, membership (see Chapter 7 for details of the clan system). In this

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<sup>3</sup> The new Nepal Inclusion Index (Bennett and Parajuli 2008) locates the Thangmi close to the bottom of every indicator out of 78 caste/ethnic groupings analyzed in Nepal.

sense, houses are an essential anchor of identity, demarcating the exclusively Thangmi domestic space of human action that determines both the quality of every day life, and the tenor of Thangmi relationships with the divine world of clan and territorial deities.



Figure 4.1 Porters' loads waiting to be picked up in Darjeeling bazaar



Figure 4.2 Thangmi houses in Suspa, Dolakha, Nepal



In Nepal's oldest Thangmi houses, some of whose residents can trace their family lineages back over a century—to the era when regular migrations to Darjeeling began—the hearth is marked by the *bampa*, a large piece of flat rock rammed vertically into the floor [see Figure 4.3]. The *bampa*'s primary present-day function seems to be as a windbreak to protect against the drafts that blow through rough-hewn doors left open in even the most inclement weather, but conjecturing about the *bampa*'s erstwhile ritual purpose is a favorite past-time while seated around the fire. Many Thangmi are eager to recover (or reinvent) the



Figure 4.3 *Bampa* in a Thangmi household, Lapilang, Dolakha, Nepal  
(Photo courtesy of Tek Bahadur Thami)

long-forgotten significance of this single distinctive feature of Thangmi domestic design, from which one of the female clan names also derives. One popular explanation in contemporary Thangmi activist circles is that the solid, heavy stone is a symbol of both Thangmi resilience in the face of oppression, and of their attachment

to the land on which their houses stand. As we sat on the cold floor around the Khaldo Hotel fire, Rana Bahadur invoked these multiple meanings with a terse but revealing statement: “It’s just like a Thangmi house, isn’t it? Only the *bampa* is missing.”

His words helped me understand the complex mixture of social, economic and personal motivations that every year compel so many Thangmi to leave their homes in Nepal, where “the air and water are clean”—a stock phrase offered immediately by many Thangmi migrants when asked what they like most about their home village—to travel for days, cross the border into India, live for several months in the airless, waterless, underground urban squalor of a place like Khaldo Hotel, and carry back-breaking loads up and down the bazaar’s sloping roads. At the end of the season, these migrants return to Nepal for several months (which are often punctuated with short trips across Nepal’s northern border to China’s Tibetan Autonomous Region) before starting the whole process all over again. As a symbol of the twin experiences of oppression and attachment to territory that characterize Thangmi identities in Nepal, the *bampa*’s absence in migrant abodes like Khaldo Hotel highlights the “push” and “pull” factors that contribute to Thangmi desires both to travel away from, and then return to, Nepal. In Darjeeling, there has historically been a lower incidence of land-based economic exploitation, and social oppression is comparatively minimal, creating stronger prospects for belonging in one regard, but the property ownership and territorial

attachment—both economic and spiritual—which underpin another important aspect of Thangmi belonging in Nepal have also been absent.

### *The Pragmatics of Cross-Border Migration*

This chapter explores the pragmatics of Thangmi cross-border circular migration, locating its historical roots in the twin experiences of economic exploitation and social exclusion. The history and ongoing circumstances of Thangmi circular migration provide a window into the transnational aspects of belonging in the Himalayas over time. Current migrations from Nepal to Indian city centers, the Middle East, the United States and beyond are now receiving substantial academic attention (Seddon, Adhikari and Gurung 2001, 2002; Graner and Gurung 2003; Thieme 2006), but the causes and effects of these more recent routes of migration can be better understood when contextualized within the long history of trans-Himalayan migration between Nepal and adjoining border regions of India and China that Thangmi experiences exemplify. The history and literature of the Nepali “diasporic” experience in northeast India is also well-documented (Onta 1996a, 1996b, 1999; Hutt 1997, 1998; Chalmers 2003; Sinha and Subba 2003), but the same cannot be said of the contemporary cross-border connections between people of Nepali heritage in India and Nepal. This chapter takes an initial step towards filling these gaps by tracing the history of what we might call the

“translocal” (Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Anthias 2006), “periphery-to-periphery” migration that results in Thangmi “transnational social formations” (Guarnizo and Smith 1998: 27) built in corners of Nepal, India and China, far from any of those countries’ political or economic centers. At the same time, I hope to broaden the parameters of the discussion of “transnationalism”, which has largely focused on migrations from so-called “peripheral” locations to cosmopolitan centers.<sup>4</sup>

In this discussion, I borrow the term “transnational village” from Peggy Levitt (2001) to emphasize the intertwined political economies and kinship networks that characterize Thangmi experiences of cross-border circular migration. The Thangmi situation is not an exclusively “diasporic” one, in which migrants leave home to permanently settle elsewhere, but rather one in which the social and economic parameters of home villages are simultaneously augmented and maintained by the experience of migration.<sup>5</sup> I suggest that although Thangmi migration initially began in response to economic and social pressures, the persistence of Thangmi circular migration has often become a lifestyle choice for contemporary individuals.<sup>6</sup> Such choices suggest that

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<sup>4</sup> My work also contributes to Luis Guarnizo and Michael Smith’s call for studies “comparing the practices of the same group in different localities, whether it is a migrant group or a participating component of a transnational social movement, to determine the effect of localities” (1998: 28).

<sup>5</sup> Other issues surrounding the use of the term “diaspora” in the Thangmi context will be discussed in Chapter 6.

<sup>6</sup> Alpa Shah (2006) makes a related argument about the social and cultural aspects of internal labor migration from Jharkhand to the brick kilns of other states in India.

“Thangminess” has become grounded in a transnational economy of belonging in which experiences of, or at the very least, knowledge of, the particularities of multiple locations makes one’s identity complete.

Put simply (and of course there is a great diversity of individual experiences), Thangmi are “richer” in Nepal than in India in terms of property ownership and cultural resources, but “poorer” in terms of social inclusion and political resources, to which Thangmi in India have far greater access. Time spent in the TAR adds another dimension, which although typically short (for most not more than one month at a time due to Chinese regulations), provides a reflective vantage point from which many Thangmi consider their long-term options in the other two countries. Acknowledging the contingent national histories that have led to different experiences in each location illuminates how both social and economic imperatives influence the pragmatics of cross-border migration, pushing and pulling in different directions to create the circular lives that many Thangmi choose. By continuing to move between Nepal, India, and the TAR, circular migrants make the best of three different but equally challenging worlds.

The experience of moving between these worlds, as well as the interaction with multiple states that such movement entails, become in themselves paradigmatic features of Thangmi identity in action, both for those who move and those who have chosen to stay put in one country or another. Kinship and community networks bring settled and migrant Thangmi into regular contact, and in the bazaars of Darjeeling

and Dram (the TAR border town which adjoins Nepal, also known as Khasa), “Thangmi” is often used as a generic term to refer to migrant porters, just as the term “Sherpa” has come to mean “mountaineer”. For instance, a 1997 short story in Nepali entitled “Thamini Kanchi” (Adhikari 1997) uses the term “Thamini”—a feminized form of “Thami”—to describe a downtrodden woman working as a porter in Darjeeling bazaar, although several details of her description do not match those of most of the Thangmi women who do indeed work as wage laborers in Darjeeling bazaar (see Figure 4.4).<sup>7</sup>



Figure 4.4 Thangmi women working as porters in Darjeeling bazaar

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<sup>7</sup> In particular, Thamini Kanchi is described as being disgusted by the fact that foreigners eat beef, and concerned that her son may “lose his caste” by associating with them. However, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 7, eating beef has long been a Thangmi consumption practice, which is not only not stigmatized, but in fact a marker of identity. In addition, the character Thamini Kanchi is upset by a foreign couple’s public display of affection. As does the concern with beef-eating, this concern also seems to reflect the high caste Hindu mores of the author more than it does those of Thangmi women. Since the short story is a work of fiction this is hardly grounds for criticism of the piece itself; rather my point is to show how the terms “Thami” and “Thamini” are popularly used as generic terms to describe porters in Darjeeling regardless of their ethnic particularity.

To their distress, relatively well-educated Thangmi born in Darjeeling who have never carried a heavy load find they are often assumed to be circular migrants from Nepal simply because of their name. In this way, the fact of circular wage migration impinges on the identities of all Thangmi, regardless of their individual economic or social positions.

In the transnational Thangmi village, notions of belonging as a whole are premised upon the simultaneously occurring experiences of property ownership and land-based exploitation in Nepal, and the social mobility made possible by the comparative lack of private property and rigid land-based social hierarchies in Darjeeling. In other words, important aspects of Thangmi belonging are produced on both sides of the border, but neither set of experiences is complete without the other. I am not suggesting that all Thangmi experience both worlds equally; but rather that, as outlined in Chapter 2, “Thangminess” is produced in a synthetic process through which diverse individuals, with as many life experiences in as many places, enact different pieces of the transnational puzzle to create an overarching framework of belonging which allows each individual to make sense of their particular piece.

### *Belonging in a Translocational World*

Attempting to understand the rationale for Thangmi circular migration and its resultant effects on identity by looking at either economic or social factors in isolation would miss the complexity that I have tried to

describe above. So would an approach which assumes that migrants primarily seek upward social mobility in a unidirectional manner; as would one that assumes that transnational migration to another country inherently entails a dislocation from one's place of origin and/or an erasure of national boundaries.

Rather, using the rubric of “belonging”, with its focus on the “intersectionality” of different interests in a “translocational” world (Anthias 2006; Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran and Vieten 2006), helps to clarify the interplay of forces at work in the Thangmi context. Moving beyond what they see as the fundamentally static nature of concepts like “diasporic identity” and “hybridity”—which despite recognizing multiple identities, still compartmentalize those identities into separate, building block-like components—theorists have used the notion of “belonging” to emphasize instead the processual intersectionality of people's experiences in different locations at different times. Belonging adds an emotive and experiential component to the rights-based notion of citizenship, and an individual aspect to the group-based notion of ethnicity.

Furthermore, “Belonging and social inclusion ... are closely connected ... It is through practices and experiences of social inclusion that a sense of a stake and acceptance in a society is created and maintained” (Anthias 2006: 21). “Social inclusion” has recently become a buzz word within development discourses in South Asia, which tend to conflate the noble goal of such inclusion with the process of



realizing it. The importance of measurable indicators at the national level are frequently over-emphasized, while the continued prevalence of deeply ingrained, localized practices of exclusion are glossed over. By adding an experiential, emotive aspect to the indicator-driven discussion of inclusion, adapting the concept of “belonging” to the South Asian setting encourages a necessary critical engagement with such discourses.

In the European context, the “the politics of belonging” has largely been used to describe the forms of exclusion and inclusion that permanent immigrants who have left their home countries experience in the multi-cultural states which are their adopted homes. Applied to the Himalayan and South Asian contexts in which Thangmi migration takes place, the concept can usefully encapsulate the forms of inclusion and exclusion that people experience in their home countries, and the migrations that such experiences may compel them to undertake. At the same time, the Thangmi case contributes to ongoing attempts to balance on the one hand the importance of single nation-states as frameworks within which belonging is defined, and on the other hand, the forceful ways in which such frameworks are unsettled for those who move across national borders on a regular basis (Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc 1994, Guarnizo and Smith 1998, Levitt 2001).

In an effort to develop a set of analytical tools that can cope with such “multiplex realities”, Anthias proposes the concept of

“translocational positionality” (2006: 26–28). In her formulation, “translocational” goes a step further than “transnational” in acknowledging the nuanced range of boundaries and hierarchies that produce feelings of belonging in a range of specific locales, some of which may be primarily defined by their geographical location within one nation–state or another, while others may be defined more strongly by local hierarchies or networks. As a concept, “translocationality” does not assume that the nation–state is the only frame in which positionalities are produced, instead shifting the emphasis to local social structures and relative levels of inclusion.<sup>8</sup> “Positionality” is “the space at the intersection of structure (social position/social effects) and agency (social positioning/meaning and practice)” (Anthias 2001: 635), and is “about the lived practices in which identification is practised/performed” (Anthias 2006: 27).

Thangmi live along a continuum of translocational positionalities—from those who have never left Nepal or India to those who are constantly on the move, and everything in between—which are shaped by specific histories of exploitation and exclusion, territorial attachment and movement, at individual, familial, and communal levels. Each of these positionalities is framed both by nation–state

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<sup>8</sup> While Anthias’ “translocationality” is a noun, a quality that individuals enact, Guarnizo and Smith use the related adjective “translocal” to describe the set of relations that creates the conditions for “translocationality”: “Translocal relations are constituted within historically and geographically specific points of origin and migration established by transmigrants. Such relations are dynamic, mutable, and dialectical. They form a triadic connection that links transmigrants, the localities to which they migrate, and their locality of origin” (1998: 13).

boundaries and the ever available prospect of moving across them. In the Thangmi context, discussions of belonging must be carefully calibrated to the different social locations that frame positionality at different moments: the nation–state, the village, the hamlet, the city, the bazaar, the tea plantation, the ethnic organization office, the district magistrate’s office, and so on. If belonging is understood to be only the practice and experience of social inclusion at the political level of the nation–state, then many Thangmi have historically not felt that they “belong” in Nepal. Despite the fact that most hold Nepali citizenship, until very recently, few Thangmi believed that they had the capacity to transform the political landscape Nepal in ways that might grant them a greater sense of belonging. It was this sense of rigidity, the lack of potential for change at the national level—no prospect of belonging—which compelled many older Thangmi to first make the journey to India. Yet recalling the figure of the *bampa* as a symbol of both resilience and rootedness, these same people felt very strongly that they belonged in their territory, in their villages, in localized places where they had long defined their own terms of belonging in relationship and resistance to local inter–ethnic status hierarchies (see Chapter 8).

Upon arrival in India, Thangmi have not immediately experienced a greater sense of inclusion at the national level. In fact, their Nepali citizenship and typically low economic status has marked them even more strongly as outsiders, but the lack of rigid status hierarchies in

Darjeeling has long afforded them an opportunity to craft their own sense of belonging through community organizations and political action, creating the potential to secure recognition at the national level. For instance, as will be described in Chapter 5, the first Thangmi ethnic association in Darjeeling was registered in 1943, while the first such organization in Nepal was founded only 45 years later. As Rhoderick Chalmers has noted, in comparison to Nepal, “within India ... there was more potential for the founding of associations with implicit or explicit political aims, or at least social/religious reformist intentions” (2003: 207). It was in large part this potential for future belonging, the hope that their children would not have to fight so hard for social inclusion, that kept and continues to keep Thangmi coming back to India. This sense of potential political belonging at the national level in India (which until very recently was lacking in Nepal) paired with the strong sense of security in local, territorially-based belonging in Nepal (which continues to be weak in India), creates a powerful recipe for a “transnational social formation” of belonging. The reproduction of this formation, this transnational village, with all of its social, economic and cultural prerogatives, depends upon the continuation of circular migration. As Creighton Peet noted in his 1978 study of migration, culture and community in Dolakha, “... migration has in part served as a mechanism for culture maintenance for the Thamis” (1978: 461).

*Situated Histories of Exploitation and Exclusion in Nepal*

The epigraph with which this chapter began is a well-known Thangmi saying which paints a stark picture of the exploitation that many Thangmi feel characterizes their historical position within Nepal's inter-ethnic socio-economic order. What does it actually mean, and how does it relate to available historical and contemporary information about Thangmi property ownership, incomes and inclusion—the empirical indicators of belonging? Written records for the Thangmi in particular, and the Dolakha region in general are sparse before 1950, but works by Mahesh Chandra Regmi (1980, 1981), Dhanavajra Vajracharya and Tek Bahadur Shrestha (2031 VS), and Mary Shepherd Slusser (1982) provide the basic historical contours regarding settlement patterns, land-holding, and Thangmi relationships with other ethnic groups and the emerging modern Nepali state. Drawing primarily on these written sources, as well as oral histories, in this section I offer a sketch of early Thangmi economic history in Nepal. The following section links this information to census data from India and oral histories about early experiences of cross-border migration.

*Kumaiko ghumai, Chhetriko jal...* The term Kumai designates a Bahun sub-caste, members of whom were some of the earliest high-caste settlers in historically Thangmi-populated areas of what are now Nepal's Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts. Along with several Chhetri families, the Kumai began to arrive in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the Shah dynasty expanded its eminent domain over different parts of

previously quasi-independent hill Nepal.<sup>9</sup> In the proverb, Kumai and Chhetri are both caricatured as slippery characters who exploit their Thangmi tenant farmers by giving them the run-around (*ghumai*) or entrapping them in a net (*jal*).

...*Newarko lekhai* ...The Newar community of Dolakha bazaar has historically occupied a position of economic and social dominance in the area. As an important entrepôt on the Kathmandu to Lhasa trade route, Slusser suggests that the town of Dolakha was most likely first developed as a Licchavi settlement (1982: 85), and then became an independent principality ruled by the ancestors of today's Dolakha Newar population.<sup>10</sup> An inscription located inside the Bhimeshwor temple complex in Dolakha dated 688 in the Newar calendar of Nepal Sambat (AD 1568) includes a list of three social groups within the community at the time: *praja*, *saja* and *thami*. Vajracharya and Shrestha (2031 VS: 98) suggest that *praja* refers to the Newar population, *saja* describes the ethnically Tibetan inhabitants of the higher villages of Dolakha, such as the Sherpa and Tamang, and *thami* refers to the Thangmi. This inscription singles out the Thangmi as the only group

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<sup>9</sup> In nationalist histories, Prithvi Narayan Shah's 1769 "unification" of Nepal is cited as the moment of the modern nation's birth. However, in ethnic and regional activist tellings of Nepali history, "domination" often replaces "unification", and the latter is debunked as a "myth".

<sup>10</sup> The earliest written record from the area dates to 1324 AD, in which the town is mentioned as the refuge destination for a deposed Mithila prince who died en route (Slusser 1982: 259). By 1453 AD, Dolakha was under the control of King Kirti Simha (Regmi 1980: 136). He and his descendants used the term *dolakhadipati* to designate themselves as rulers independent from the powers of the Kathmandu Valley. Indra Simha Deva demonstrated his kingdom's economic power beyond a doubt by minting the first coin within Nepal's borders in approximately 1546 AD (Regmi 1980: 171).

that must pay taxes to the Newar rulers on demand, suggesting that a Thangmi community has resided in the villages surrounding the market town of Dolakha since at least the 16th century, and that they were compelled to pay taxes to Dolakha's Newar rulers. This potentially exploitative relationship was codified in writing (*lekhai*).<sup>11</sup>

...*Thangmiko kal*...Thangmi narratives suggest that before they became subject to Bahun, Chhetri, and Newar domination, they held large swathes of *kipat* (N), ancestral property, which they started to lose only over the last 150 years as high-caste families originating from regions further west migrated to Dolakha and appropriated Thangmi holdings (see Chapter 6 for further discussion of *kipat* and its implications). The Thangmi, in turn, moved east to Darjeeling and beyond. Buddha Laxmi, one of the oldest Thangmi women in Dolakha's Suspa-Kshamawati VDC, explained:

When I was a small child there were only ten houses in total between Pashelung and Ramedanda [two hamlets about one mile apart], and now there are 96. There were three houses in Gumphung [another hamlet], now there are 19. There was only one Budathoki [Chhetri] house then, now there are six...Those people came later. They started to come in my grandfather's time, more came to give us trouble during my father's time. He had to go to court to defend his land. There were no positive relations between the Bahun-Chhetri and Thangmi, only fights.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The historical and ritual relationships between the Thangmi and Dolakha Newar are further discussed in Chapters 6 and 8, while the power embedded in the act of writing is discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>12</sup> Thangmi often use the hyphenated phrase Bahun-Chhetri to refer to anyone from either of those groups, but this usage fails to recognize the real differences in cultural practice and economic status between the two. The Nepal Inclusion Index (Bennett and Parajuli 2008) shows these disparities clearly, with Chhetris substantially less well-off than Bahuns nationwide.

This increase in population density and shift in land ownership was in part the result of shifting relationships between Dolakha and the central Nepali state. By the middle of the 18th century, although Dolakha remained nominally independent, the area's villagers came under the jurisdiction of King Jagajjaya Malla's tax collectors. Documents show that several villagers registered complaints of harassment against his tax collecting officials (Regmi 1981: 12–13). During the same time period, the tradition of awarding military officials and civil servants land tracts as *jagir* (N) in lieu of cash payment began. After Prithvi Narayan Shah annexed Dolakha, this practice became commonplace, with army officials receiving payments in land that had previously been farmed by Thangmi inhabitants of the area. The redistribution of land accelerated under the rule of prime minister Bhimsen Thapa, when in 1862 VS (1805–1806 AD) he confiscated 82 *khet* (N), or 8,200 *muri* (N), of rice land in Dolakha as *jagir* for the army (Regmi 1981: 15).<sup>13</sup>

After first settling in the area on such *jagir* tracts, many of the less scrupulous new migrants began appropriating further lands by acting as moneylenders to their Thangmi neighbors. Charging high interest rates of up to 60% per annum, such moneylenders made it very difficult for Thangmi farmers to pay back their loans, and when a

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<sup>13</sup> *Khet* means simply “wet cultivated field”, while *muri* is a specific measurement of a field's yield, equaling approximately 160 pounds of harvested grain.



borrower defaulted, the lender would foreclose on his land. Man Bahadur, a village elder in Chokati, Sindhupalcok, described the situation of diminishing trust as follows:

Originally there were only Thangmi in this area. Eventually, the Bahun–Chhetri came and stole our land. In the old days, Thangmi would count their days of work by making marks on a piece of wood or making knots in a string. This habit was based on trust of each other, and trust between employers and employed. This trust was destroyed by the Bahuns...What used to cost Rs. 2 (for land) now costs Rs. 20,000, so even a debt that sounds small of a few rupees was actually big. People had to work off their debt to the Bahuns by working on their land, and if they couldn't pay their debts in cash, they had to pay by giving up pieces of their land.

In this way, many Thangmi either went deeply into debt, and/or became tenant sharecroppers on portions of the land that they had previously owned. However, most families were able to hold on to enough arable land to feed themselves for several months of the year. With insufficient land to survive, but too much to abandon, the economic scenario in Nepal's Thangmi villages at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century encouraged circular migration as a means of maintaining traditional lands, while augmenting their agrarian yield with cash income.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Beginnings of Migration to Darjeeling and Beyond*

...*Chiyako botma sun phulcha*...At roughly the same historical moment that the appropriation of Thangmi land accelerated in the mid-19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See also K. Pradhan (1991) for a general description of these historical dynamics in eastern Nepal.

century, new income-generating opportunities began to emerge in Darjeeling. In 1835, the British took control of this virtually uninhabited tract of forested land, which had earlier changed hands several times between the ruling powers of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. Darjeeling's strategically situated ridgeline, which overlooked the plains of Bengal to the south and the mountains of Sikkim to the north, was to become a bustling hill station for holidaying colonial administrators—known as the “Queen of the Hills”—and the center of colonial tea production (Kennedy 1996, Q. Pradhan 2007). When the British first surveyed the area in 1835, they recorded a total population of only 100 (Samanta 2000: 21), and these were largely indigenous semi-nomadic members of the Lepcha ethnic group. Building infrastructure required workers, and the tea industry founded in the mid-1850s called for especially vast human resources. This is where the Thangmi and other Nepalis came in.<sup>15</sup>

Many of the earliest Thangmi migrants came to work on tea estates. First one or two men from a single village would establish themselves as trusted workers, and might eventually be promoted to the role of overseer and recruiter.<sup>16</sup> Traveling back to Nepal every few

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<sup>15</sup> Migration from the hills of Nepal to Darjeeling was by no means an exclusively Thangmi phenomenon. Members of virtually every one of Nepal's caste and ethnic groups made their way to Darjeeling and other parts of India during the same historical period. What remains unique about the Thangmi situation, however, is the ongoing prevalence of cross-border migration, a practice engaged in only minimally by other groups.

<sup>16</sup> I write “men” intentionally. Although one of the intriguing features of contemporary tea plantation life is that men and women are employed in a roughly egalitarian manner, oral histories suggest that in the early days, British managers preferred men

years, they would return to the plantations with fresh new labor procured through their kinship networks. The tea plantation of Tumsong (often pronounced Tamsang) is a case in point, where the first Thangmi overseer arrived from Dolakha's Lapilang village in the late 1800s. He was one of the first Thangmi to settle in the area, and many Darjeeling Thangmi can trace their ancestry back to him. Tumsong tea plantation maintains a majority Thangmi labor force to this day, due to the rules of tenure and inheritance that have governed tea plantation jobs and accommodation since the colonial era.<sup>17</sup>

Another important feature of Darjeeling's colonial tea economy was that almost all large tracts of land were owned either by government or private tea companies, with small allotments granted to plantation workers on which they had temporary rights, but could not own. This meant that there was no prospect of property ownership for Thangmi migrants, who encountered for the first time a mode of economic production different from the agrarian, subsistence farming economy they had known in Nepal.<sup>18</sup> As the protagonist in Lainsing

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coming alone for seasonal labor to do the initial work of clearing forest to plant tea. Only several years later, after it became clear that the tea crop would be successful and year-round labor was needed were men encouraged to bring their families to settle. Thereafter women were also employed, and they continue to constitute a substantial portion of the tea plantation workforce today. See Chatterjee (2001) for an analysis of gender on contemporary tea plantations.

<sup>17</sup> See Chatterjee (2001) for details of this system.

<sup>18</sup> Some families from Nepal who became close to British colonial administrators were granted property in the area as rewards for their good service, most notably the Newar Pradhans. Although they farmed cash crops, such as oranges and cardamom, providing additional opportunities for Thangmi and other wage laborers from Nepal, such farms were part of a larger cash economy, and Nepal's land-based status hierarchies were never replicated.

Bangdel's Nepali-language novel, *Muluk Bahira* ("Outside the Country") describes the situation he encountered in India upon emigrating from Nepal, "Although there was no land or kipat [ancestral land exempt from taxes] in Mugalan [India], one could earn enough to feed one's stomach" (as cited in Hutt 1998: 203).<sup>19</sup>

Besides tea, Darjeeling's other major attraction was the British army recruitment center which opened in Darjeeling in 1857. Enlistment in the Gurkhas became a prize objective for many young men from Nepal's so-called "martial races", a group from which the Thangmi were excluded (recall that the recruitment officers Northey and Morris dismissed them as "coarse in appearance, and the inferior of the other races in social and religious matters, they do not merit further description" [1928: 260]).<sup>20</sup> But this did not stop some Thangmi from joining up under assumed names and living a double life as Rai, Gurung or Magar.

The British preference for certain "races" did not seem to apply to non-enlisted men responsible for road building and other support services, and many Thangmi were contracted by the army and paid a daily wage for their work. Substantial numbers of Thangmi worked in Darjeeling, Sikkim, Assam, and as far as Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh

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<sup>19</sup> Tanka Subba (1989) provides an overview of economic relations in Darjeeling. Chapter 6 of this dissertation discusses the historical and contemporary meanings of *kipat*.

<sup>20</sup> Again, these employment opportunities in the army were only open to men. Later on, men who had served in the army might bring their families to settle and/or to do seasonal labor in the hospitality sector once Darjeeling resorts began to boom.

in road building gangs, which for many defined their migrant experience. When asked where they worked, many older Thangmi said simply, “We went to the road”.<sup>21</sup> Often, they do not know the names of the specific places in which they worked, and the English term “road” is used to denote transient road-building sites which were a focal point of their experience.

The rapid development of Darjeeling and its environs, through the powerful combination of tea, resorts, roads and a strategic border to defend, led to astronomical population growth in the area. According to Kennedy, Darjeeling “experienced the most rapid rate of growth on record for nineteenth-century Bengal” (1996: 184). By 1881, 88,000 residents of Darjeeling had been born district, comprising over 60% of the total district population (Samanta 2000: 22).

It is hard to know how many of these were Thangmi. The 1872 Census of India lists 13 Thangmi language speakers in Darjeeling, a number which had risen to 319 by 1901 (Grierson 1909: 280). However, these numbers are just the beginning of the contentious politics of the census for Thangmi in both India and Nepal, and must be taken with a grain of salt. Due to self-misrepresentation of themselves as members of other groups (largely for army recruitment purposes) and the preference for the Nepali language as a *lingua franca* in Darjeeling’s multi-ethnic context, it is likely that these

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<sup>21</sup> Original Nepali: *Hami ‘road’ ma gayo*.

census figures, which are intriguingly based on language rather than ethnicity, substantially under-represent the real numbers of Thangmi. “We spoke Thangmi secretly”, explained a senior Thangmi resident of Darjeeling about language use there during the early part of the century. Thangmi were as eager as the rest to be including in the pan-Nepali political identity that was emerging in Darjeeling at the time, with the Nepali language as its cornerstone, so speaking Thangmi in public was not a popular practice.

*Pre-1950 Narratives of Migration: Seeking Employment and Inclusion*

In this section I present excerpts from interviews with several older Thangmi who migrated from Nepal to Darjeeling before 1950. Some immediately settled in India, others went back and forth between the two countries seasonally for several years and then settled in India at a much later date, while still others traveled between the two countries seasonally for several years but ultimately settled in Nepal.

Each of these narratives emphasizes different particular life experiences that led to migration, but all have in common a desire to leave the challenging economic situation of land pressure and debt in Nepal, and the social exclusion and oppression that accompanied it. They highlight the relatively unstructured, unhierarchical nature of Darjeeling society at the time, at least when compared to Nepal, where regardless of ethnic identity or class, one could get ahead by working hard. In addition, since everyone in Darjeeling was a migrant—the area

was virtually unpopulated until 1835, and private property ownership was highly restricted due to the dominance of the tea estates—the opportunities for land-based exploitation endemic in Nepal’s agrarian setting were reduced in Darjeeling’s emerging cash economy.

Bir Bahadur, who was born in Dolakha’s Lapilang village and engaged in circular migration for many years before finally settling in Darjeeling, explained:

My father had a loan. I came back here [to Darjeeling] after paying it off. In one month, it accrued Rs. 10 interest on Rs. 100. It was a loan from Lapilang’s *maila* [N: middle-brother] headman. In those days, they really oppressed us. Because they were rich and we were poor, they had us harnessed to the plow like oxen. It’s not like that here [in Darjeeling].

Bir Bahadur’s pride at being able to pay back his father’s loan after a few seasons of work in Darjeeling was evident, and demonstrates one of the economic imperatives which initially made circular migration an attractive strategy for many Thangmi from Nepal. By earning cash in Darjeeling, where migrants could keep costs low by staying in cheap accommodation like Khaldol Hotel and then using it to pay off debts back in Nepal, Thangmi could ensure that their ancestral property was not appropriated by creditors. “We were able keep our *bampa*”<sup>22</sup>—that hearth-side stony icon of resilience and territorial attachment—as another migrant who paid off debts with Darjeeling-earned cash put it. However, most earned just enough to pay off their debts and maintain

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<sup>22</sup> Original Nepali: *Bampa rakhna payo*.

the status quo, but not to actually transform the socio-economic order. As Creighton Peet observed, “For the majority of Thamis ... circular migration has brought just enough income to pay off debts and regain some economic independence from the moneylenders and large landowners. Much of their earnings go, in fact, into the hands of their wealthy Bahun–Chhetri patrons and thus help to support this latter group’s dominant position in the community” (1978: 461).

Harka Bahadur, a senior stalwart of the Thangmi community in Darjeeling, who became known as “Amrikan” because he had worked with American soldiers in the Burma theater of World War II in an army support role, described a different scenario. His parents’ relatively substantial property holding in Nepal became inadequate due to a surfeit of sons, leading him to test the greener pastures of Darjeeling’s cash economy. As the youngest of six brothers, Amrikan knew that he would have little chance of inheriting an adequate piece of ancestral property. Birth order and family size were important factors in shaping who would migrate and when within each individual family. Based on his research in Nepal, Peet concluded that these two factors were not in themselves predictive of who might migrate (1978: 386), but my research in Darjeeling shows that men like Amrikan were very conscious of their particular constellation of family size, sibling order, and land inheritance as they made choices for ongoing circular migration or permanent settlement in Darjeeling. It was not that Amrikan’s position at the bottom of a big family’s age–status order led



him inevitably to migrate to Darjeeling and ultimately settle there; for many other migrants, superficially similar backgrounds led to different choices, like those of the man who decided to settle in Darjeeling because “my youngest brother ‘ate’ all of our land”.<sup>23</sup> Rather, each individual’s family situation strongly conditioned the range of options that they might choose.

Amrikan described his first impressions of Darjeeling as follows:

When I first came here, while I was looking for work, I could tell Thangmi from their faces, and I would also ask, “Are you Thangmi?” and when they said, “We are Thangmi” I would ask, “Where are you from?” and when they said “We are from Dolakha Dui Number”, then we knew each other.<sup>24</sup> That was a good time. Ethnicity was not that important, it was only much later that there was any competition. At that time, you could earn one or two *anna* [N: coin = 1/16 of a rupee] a day, putting it all together in a week you’d have 10 or 15 *anna*. In this place full of money, we were all equal.

Amrikan’s description, although perhaps unrealistically utopian, suggests that in Darjeeling, social exclusion was not a major problem for Thangmi in the way it had been in Nepal. The fixed hierarchies that Thangmi migrants had known in their village homes came unmoored in this “place of money”, where everyone had an “equal” chance.

Silipitik, a senior figure in Dolakha’s Pashelung village, who engaged in circular migration for most of his life, but eventually settled in Nepal, described his contrasting experiences in the two countries as follows:

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<sup>23</sup> Original Nepali: *Bhaile hamro sabai jaga khai diyo*.

<sup>24</sup> *Dui Number* “Number Two” was the Nepali administrative zone within Dolakha district fell before the country’s reorganization into 75 districts.

Over there, no one talked about caste or ethnicity unless you were in the army. Here, everyone is always harping on about it, who is high and who is low, who is big and who is small. There everyone just worked hard. I remember a speech I heard once in Judge Bazaar [one of Darjeeling's central public squares], where a man said, "Here, there is no caste and no ethnicity, no high and no low. Here, there are only two categories we need to know about, male and female. There are no other divisions in our society."<sup>25</sup> I liked what he said so much, I never forgot it. There, it really was that way, here it never will be. I only came back because I had no brothers and had to care for my mother and our land when she got old, otherwise I would have stayed in that place where people could make speeches like that.

Silipitik's nostalgic reminiscences of this speech, which he repeated to me on several occasions, seemed to encapsulate a powerful moment in the development of his own awareness of the different frames that Nepal and India respectively offered for the articulation of belonging. Both in listening to the speech and reflecting on it years later, he became aware of the ways in which his own life was marked by the hierarchies and structures of each location and nation-state that he had experienced in his life of circular migration, and the choices he had ultimately made between them.

Silipitik, like most Thangmi migrants, had been to Tibet several times before ever going to Darjeeling. Although they would travel north from their Himalayan border homes to the towns of Dram/Khasa and Nyalam/Kuti (as the towns were called in Tibetan and Nepali respectively) to trade their grain for salt several times a year, the Thangmi never developed trading conglomerates like those well-

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<sup>25</sup> Silipitik could not identify the speaker or the political context of this event.

documented among the Sherpa, Newar, Thakali, and Manangi communities (von Furer-Haimendorf 1975, J. Fisher 1986, Lewis 1993, Vinding 1998, Watkins 1996). Instead, they would travel alone or in small groups on the rough mountain trail that, in just a few long days of walking, brought them directly over the mountains to Khasa and Kuti.

Dhanbir, a Thangmi man from Dolakha who had been to Tibet 17 times before the border closed, described his most enduring memories of the place as follows:

The Tibetans called us Rongsha or Rongba. They didn't think we Thangmi were different from other Nepalis. Everyone from this area traveled up there: Thangmi, Newar, Tamang, even Bahun and Chhetri. The Tibetans were friendly and didn't seem to differentiate between different ethnic groups, either within their own community or among Nepalis.

From an outsider's perspective at least, in Tibet, as in Darjeeling, the particulars of ethnicity did not seem to matter in the same way as they did back in Nepal.<sup>26</sup> Certainly, Thangmi were different from Tibetans, but they were not immediately placed in a low status category, nor were they taken advantage of. Thangmi joked about how Tibetans could not differentiate between Newar and Thangmi, who often traveled up from Dolakha at the same time. Some Thangmi had Tibetan *mit*—a fictive kin relation created between trading partners from different ethnic groups—a fact often recounted to me to

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<sup>26</sup> Tibetan societies have their own social hierarchies, which may not have been evident to Thangmi within the relatively short and superficial context of trading relationships. See Fjeld (2008).

emphasize the relatively non-hierarchical nature of Thangmi relationships with Tibetans. In these ways, the local status hierarchies which structured Thangmi lives in Nepal were unsettled by their contrasting experiences in Tibet, as well as in India.

The proximity of many Thangmi villages to Khasa and Kuti meant that until the Sino-Nepali border was closed in the 1950s, most immediate trading needs were taken care of in these Tibetan towns. Between these trading trips to the north and wage labor done in Darjeeling, there was little need for Thangmi to go to Kathmandu. Few Thangmi visited the city until much later (and the settled population in Nepal's capital is still extremely small compared to that of other groups—with under 400 Thangmi permanently residing in the city in 2006), a fact which suggests that the Nepali nation-state, with Kathmandu at its political center, was not the most prominent frame of reference in which Thangmi defined their sense of belonging. Rather, they had a trans-Himalayan sense of belonging, grounded in particular localities of Dolakha, Sindhupalchok, Darjeeling, Sikkim, Khasa, Kuti and beyond. As argued above, maintaining this translocational positionality—and the economic strategies that supported it—depended upon regular movement across borders, rather than upon strong legal or emotional ties to any single nation-state.

With the pattern of permanent settlement in Darjeeling so strong among other ethnic groups of Nepali heritage, why did so many Thangmi continue to practice circular migration instead of severing

ties with Nepal and settling permanently in India?<sup>27</sup> Guarnizo and Smith pose a similar question in more general terms:

A critical unanswered question raised by scholars of transnational migration is whether transnational practices and relations are merely an evanescent phenomenon which will not last beyond first generation migrants. Or, by contrast, are transnational social practices becoming an enduring structural characteristic of global social organization? (1998: 15)

The Thangmi experience in Darjeeling suggests that the answer to this question is particular to each group and their historical, social and economic situation. With apparently so much in common with other migrants from Nepal to Darjeeling—many of whom also experienced economic exploitation and social exclusion—one wonders why the Thangmi relationship to the place followed a somewhat different trajectory. Several factors seem to have been at play. First of all, the Thangmi population numbers in Darjeeling were tiny compared to those of other groups. For example, the 1872 Census which enumerated 13 Thangmi speakers listed 6,754 Rai, 6,567 Tamang, and 1,120 Newar. With so many more members, the other ethnic groups were better situated to recreate their communities in full in a new location, while many Thangmi may have felt uncomfortable settling permanently in a place where they were so few in number and it was difficult to create social networks and maintain cultural practices. Second of all, although one tea estate did have a majority Thangmi

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<sup>27</sup> Hutt cites a 1974 survey in which out of 411 ethnically Nepali residents of Darjeeling tea estates, 48% had never traveled outside the district and only 13% had ever visited Nepal (1997: 123).

work force as described above, this was an exception rather than the norm. In general, most Thangmi survived on short-term wage labor and did not receive the right to settle on tea estate property. Combined with lack of easy access to lucrative army jobs (unless one lied about one's identity), these factors meant that compared to the other groups, Thangmi existence in Darjeeling was relatively insecure from a long-term perspective, although the short-term earnings could be substantial.

Ultimately, although the structures of social exclusion so prevalent in Nepal were substantially softened in Darjeeling, the reality was far from Amrikan or Silipitik's nostalgic descriptions of an egalitarian utopia. While "those entering Darjeeling ... were free from the Muluki Ain promulgated in Nepal" (Pradhan 2004: 11)—free from the *structures* of oppression as legislated by the Nepali state—they were not necessarily free from the *practices* of oppression that traveled with migrant Nepalis to Darjeeling. Such hierarchies did not disappear overnight, and despite the potential for economic mobility, socially speaking the Thangmi continued to be treated as low men on the social totem pole. As the Nepali community in Darjeeling began to fashion a self-consciously modern ethnic identity within India in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, its scions sought to excise evidence of "backwardness", of which poor migrant laborers from Nepal, like most Thangmi, were constant reminders. Rhoderick Chalmers suggests that, "An inevitable concomitant of the emergence of a more concrete and

precisely defined conception of Nepalianness was the parallel development of new paradigms of exclusion” (2003: 172). The historical details of how Thangmi experienced this exclusion, and how they set about rectifying it, will be discussed in the next chapter. In this kind of environment—where Thangmi were not so badly exploited and excluded as they were in Nepal, but were not exactly included either—perhaps it made good sense to maintain their claim to the only place they knew that they belonged: the small pieces of property in Nepal on which their sense of territorial identity was premised.

#### *Nation–States on the Rise and the Making of Dual Citizens*

Three historical events around 1950 radically altered the political contexts that framed Thangmi transnational social formations: Indian independence in 1947, and the ensuing Indo–Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950; Nepal’s first period of democracy in 1950–1951; and China’s occupation of Tibet from 1950 onwards, which led to the closure of Nepal’s northern border for the better part of a decade. Each of these events marked for its respective country the transition to a modern nation–state. Both ideas of citizenship and of national boundaries were redefined, affecting the ways in which Thangmi circular lives were structured.

The 1950 Indo–Nepali Friendship Treaty for the first time defined the notion of citizenship in a way that mattered for Thangmi circular migrants. Article 7 of the treaty created trouble for all Indian

citizens of Nepali heritage, since, “According to the treaty every Nepali-speaking person in India is a temporary citizen of the country” (Timsina 1992: 51), and, “those who are Indian nationals cannot easily prove their citizenship when the Treaty makes no distinction between them and Nepalese nationals” (Hutt 1997: 124). For Thangmi moving back and forth between Nepal and India, the concept of a singular citizenship in one nation-state was new; as was the very idea of a clearly bounded nation-state which accorded citizens “rights” in exchange for exclusive allegiance. As Yuval-Davis et al. put it, following Cohen, “citizenship has not always been related to a nation-state” (2006: 2).<sup>28</sup>

Latte Apa, Darjeeling’s senior Thangmi guru originally from the village of Alampu in Dolakha, explained:

When we first came, we did not say ‘this is Nepal’ and ‘this is India’. We had to walk for 10 or 12 days through the hills, and one day was no different from the next. It was only when we saw the train that we said, ‘This must be India’. We knew that there was no train in Nepal. And then there were the *saheb* [the British]. They did not come to Nepal. Only after they left was there trouble. Then people said “Are you Indian?” and we had to think about it.

Many Thangmi described the early 1950s as a challenging time to be in India. Questions of national allegiance were on the table, and given the fact that many Thangmi were indeed only “temporary citizens” of India, those who wanted to stay felt particularly hard-pressed to demonstrate

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<sup>28</sup> Hutt’s summary of the Nepali language literature of migration confirms this point: “There are very few references in these texts to the political entities of Nepal and India: the émigrés move between Pahar and Mugalan” (1998: 202).



their Indianness. It was at this historical moment that some Darjeeling Thangmi, such as the family of the Tumsong tea plantation overseer, intentionally attempted to sever their ties with their brethren in Nepal in order to assimilate their linguistic and cultural practices to the Indian mainstream. As Tumsong's current patriarch explained to me, "My father said, 'Our family has been here for generations. You are not to talk with those from Nepal. We do not need the Thangmi language or shamans, those are for the *pahar*, not for India.'" Other Thangmi took the opposite approach, such as the guru Rana Bahadur, as described in Chapter 3, who decided that this was the moment to return permanently to Nepal, with the promise of democracy and land reform there suggesting that the social order might become more flexible. Such returnees took with them all that they had learned from their experiences in India, and in many cases remained both socially and economically linked to Darjeeling, sending their children to work there later (they could always contact an uncle or friend who had settled in India) while slowly expanding their property base in Nepal with the money they had earned.

For the vast majority, however, these changes were only a temporary disturbance until they came to understand the new system(s) and realized that they could procure at least some of the documents of citizenship in both locations. Such documents did not change others' attitudes towards them—in India they would always be stereotyped as Nepali, and in Nepal those born in India would be

stereotyped as outsiders—but these papers did provide legal instruments with which to maintain property ownership in Nepal while simultaneously working in India.

Neither Nepal nor India grants citizenship automatically at birth. Rather, in Nepal it must be “made” (N: *nagarikta banaunu*), while in India, people speak of “registering” themselves as citizens (N: *darta garnu*). Although it has been legitimately argued that these processes can make it difficult for deserving citizens to obtain papers, from another perspective, the intentionality required (Nepali or Indian citizenship does not just happen to you) accords a certain level of agency to prospective citizens to choose which combination of documents they want. Since holding papers from both countries is technically illegal, I have not been able to conduct ethnographic fieldwork about the specific processes through which people obtained either or both. However, many Thangmi alluded to the fact that obtaining some Indian documents—particularly voter registration cards—was not difficult, since from the first post-Independence elections onwards, local politicians in Darjeeling had viewed circular migrants as a secret weapon with which to boost their voter base, and were therefore eager to register them as voters. Although the ration card was supposed to precede the voter card, with the latter issued on the basis of the former, many Thangmi apparently went the other way

around, obtaining a ration card by showing their voter card and complaining that they had not received or had lost the former.<sup>29</sup>

In Nepal, the *nagarikta* citizenship document must be applied for after the age of 16 on the basis of one's father's citizenship document in the locality in which he is, or was, registered. As long as the father holds citizenship, the son is entitled to it in that locality regardless of whether he was born there or has ever lived there.<sup>30</sup> For many Darjeeling Thangmi families, keeping the inheritance of *nagarikta* alive became an important strategy to maintain landholdings in Nepal, since non-Nepali citizens may not own land. Many young Thangmi men born in Darjeeling described their first trip to Nepal as a rite of passage at the age of 16 or soon thereafter to "make" their citizenship and visit their family's ancestral land holdings. This practice has clearly been ongoing for generations, since several of the men who told me such stories had fathers, grandfathers, and great grandfathers born in Darjeeling—but all still held Nepali *nagarikta*. Most recently, Nepali citizenship has become a much sought after commodity for Thangmi from India who wish to work abroad in the Middle East or beyond, since popular wisdom has it that it is much easier to get a visa as a Nepali than as an Indian (I do not know whether this is true, and if so,

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<sup>29</sup> Although some individuals were able to procure ration cards in this manner, many also complained that it was difficult, and although they did have voter registration cards, they did not have ration cards, which were the mark of full citizenship.

<sup>30</sup> Nepal's citizenship laws have only very recently changed (in 2006) to allow women to pass on citizenship to their children as well.

why). In all of these ways, holding at least partial dual citizenship papers has become the norm, rather than the exception, for many Thangmi. Few people I interviewed seemed to feel conflict over their obligations to more than one nation–state. Rather, they felt that given their level of social exclusion at the national level in Nepal, and their lack of property ownership in India, both states in a way owed them the opportunity to also belong to the other.

While notions of citizenship and national borders were being defined between India and Nepal, the Chinese occupation of Tibet led to the closure of the northern border across which Thangmi had long traveled. The opening of a newly redefined border in 1960 radically altered Thangmi sensibilities of their national positionality, as this quotation from Dhanbir illustrates:

In those days, Kuti [Nyalam] was closer and easier to reach than Kathmandu. We did most of our business in Kuti. We did not think of Kuti as a very different country, although it was high up in the mountains and people spoke a different language, like they did in Dolakha and Sailung [where Newar and Tamang were respectively spoken]. There was no ‘border’ or ‘checking’. You had to store your *khukuri* [N: large curved knife] with local headmen when you arrived and pay tax to them when you left. But suddenly the border closed and everything changed. We heard that the Chinese had come and now Kuti was theirs. We could not go. From then on we had to go to Kathmandu, before that there was no reason to go there.

Political changes in a neighboring nation–state contributed towards reorienting Thangmi relationships with their own; with Kuti inaccessible, Thangmi began traveling to Kathmandu more regularly to procure basic goods, and concomitantly began to conceptualize

themselves as citizens within Nepal's national framework. However, there were no roads from the Thangmi region to Kathmandu until the mid-1960s (the Arniko Highway from Kathmandu to Lhasa, which runs through Sindhupalchok, was completed in 1966, and the linked Jiri road from Khadichaur to Dolakha was completed only in 1985), and walking to Kathmandu from Thangmi villages still took up to a week—not much less than going all the way to Darjeeling. Moreover, there were few immediate opportunities for work in Kathmandu, since the labor jobs that Thangmi would have been qualified for were already filled by others (largely by low-caste Jyapu Newar and Tamang from villages closer to the city). This meant that although Kathmandu became the desired destination for short-term trading, the closure of the Tibetan border did not have much effect on established patterns of circular migration to Darjeeling.

The changes in Tibet, however, did present one other option to a very small sub-group of Thangmi who lived at the northernmost fringe of the region, right up against what was to become the Sino-Nepali border in the Lapchi area. In 1960, China and Nepal entered into a series of boundary agreements and treaties, which included a strategic trade of two villages previously in Nepal for two villages previously in Tibet.<sup>31</sup> Although they were a minority in these predominantly Sherpa villages, a small number of Thangmi families were affected by these

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<sup>31</sup> For details see <http://bordernepal.wordpress.com/2007/01/19/nepal-china-border-demarcation/>. Accessed September 8, 2008.

events. Along with the rest of the villagers, they were given the option of staying in their homes and becoming Chinese citizens (with no easy option for dual citizenship, since China enforced borders and paperwork rigorously), or moving away to remain Nepali citizens. A small number of Thangmi chose to become Chinese, but in doing so they essentially gave up their ethnic identity and assimilated to the dominant Sherpa group in the area, who were listed as an ethnic population by the national classification projects of Chinese ethnology in the 1950s. Many other Thangmi derided the choices of these individuals at the time, but they were forced to reconsider later when China leapt ahead of Nepal economically. During my fieldwork in the TAR in 2005, I documented a small number of Thangmi from Nepal who were attempting to claim Chinese citizenship in Nyalam and Dram through certification as Chinese Sherpa, usually by marriage to *bona fide* Chinese citizens, but occasionally through protracted residence on temporary labor permits. Those trying to claim Chinese citizenship were only a very small percentage of the much larger numbers of Thangmi who spent one month at a time in this Sino-Tibetan-Nepali border zone, taking advantage of China's economic strength to boost their earnings from Darjeeling and other emerging locations closer to home. More importantly, as described in the introduction to this dissertation, those who sought to claim Chinese citizenship disclaimed their Thangmi identity, and therefore are not discussed further here.

### *The Future of Circular Migration and Thangmi Belonging*

Although there have been many important historical events since 1960 in all of the nation-states in which Thangmi spend time (each of which could make a chapter in itself), I now jump to the present and speculate about the future of both Thangmi circular migration and notions of belonging. Despite the particularities of the last several decades of history, there is no question that since the 1950s, ideals of national identity have become ever clearer in all three countries in question, as constitutions have been propagated, national languages promoted, and the symbolic repertoire of national hegemony solidified. The reality, however, is that for the most part, until recently Thangmi have remained only peripherally engaged by these domains of national belonging, preferring to define belonging in reference to the multiple localities of their transnational village.

At the time that I conducted fieldwork in Darjeeling in 2004–2005, circular migration was alive and well, and in fact both the numbers of Thangmi migrants in India and the duration of their stays had increased due to the Maoist–state conflict in Nepal (during Darjeeling’s Gorkhaland agitation in the late 1980s, the opposite had occurred). Yet Nepal’s civil conflict, along with other local, national, and international dynamics of development and migration, has also brought about a new set of opportunities for Thangmi in Nepal. These dynamics have combined to create a substantial out-migration of high-caste individuals and families from Dolakha and Sindhupalchok.

Some have gone to Kathmandu, while others have moved to Charikot (Dolakha's district headquarters) or Bahrabise, both emergent regional centers, to start businesses or work in government or development. Still others have joined the growing number of international Nepali migrants going to study or work in white collar jobs in urban India, the Middle East, the US, or elsewhere. All of these lifestyle transformations require substantial amounts of capital—to buy land in Kathmandu, invest in a business in a regional town, or finance a ticket abroad—so over the last decade, many of the high-caste land-owners of the region have divested themselves of substantial portions of their property. In response, in an example of what Tania Li has called “indigenous microcapitalism” (forthcoming), Thangmi have begun buying pieces of land vacated by those who once used it as a tool of exploitation against them.

Where has the money for such purchases come from? In part from newly emerging sites of wage labor closer to home—a Thangmi-owned slate mine in Alampu,<sup>32</sup> chicken farms and furniture factories in Charikot, hydroelectric plants in Sindhupalchok, and local road construction projects, to name a few—which allow workers to keep more of their hard earned wages by living and eating at home. Some individuals have also taken out low-interest loans from micro-credit institutions like the Agricultural Development Bank in order to finance

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<sup>32</sup> See Dipesh Kharel's award-winning film *A Life with Slate* and his accompanying MA thesis (2006).



such purchases, which they are then able to pay back over time with money saved from being able to live off their own land.

As Bir Bahadur, one of the early migrants, said about the changed situation in Nepal from his vantage point in Darjeeling, “Now they can’t oppress us, the Thangmi have won and the Chhetri have all gone to Kathmandu.” He had heard about these shifts from his nephews, who continued to travel back and forth between Nepal and India. Why were they still doing so if the environment was indeed now more favorable in Nepal? “It’s fun to travel with my friends and see how things are done in other places. Also I don’t have to eat off of my parents’ land” said one young migrant. Another older man added, “It’s how we Thangmi enjoy ourselves.”

Recalling that choices for circular migration were historically diversified across families throughout the entire transnational social formation, a range of options continue to be available and desirable in specific circumstances. Even for families who have recently expanded their land-holdings in Nepal, an actual increase in grain yield may take several years to realize, and in the meantime it’s helpful if young, able-bodied members live away from home and feed themselves for several months of the year.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the trends of “micro-capitalism” and economic development closer to home are new enough that they have yet to benefit substantial numbers of Thangmi. Finally,

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<sup>33</sup> The Nepal Inclusion Index shows that Thangmi indicators for nutrition and education have indeed recently improved (Bennett and Parajuli 2008).

although Nepal's civil conflict created opportunities for some, the uncertainties and pressures that came along with it made others want, or need, to leave. For all of these reasons, circular migration has continued to be practiced by many Thangmi, as a way to "enjoy" (N: *ramaunu*) an otherwise difficult life by seeing other parts of the world, and perhaps most importantly, other parts of one's own community. As the choice of such expressions indicates, some component of belonging may be found in the camaraderie of migration itself.

Turning from the economic to the social, prospects for national belonging in Nepal—"social inclusion"—have improved substantially with the political transformations of the last several years, and many Thangmi have sought to capitalize on these opportunities by engaging in political activism within the frameworks of both ethnic and party politics, as will be discussed in the next chapter. But again, such activities are part of a larger transnational social formation, and many of those Thangmi individuals most involved in politics in Nepal trace their activist interests to experiences of social inclusion and political activism that they had in India, where the potential for such practices of belonging were visible far earlier. As the former general secretary of the Nepal Thami Samaj explained:

It was only when I went to visit my relatives in Darjeeling and Sikkim in the late 1990s that I understood that we had rights which we could demand from the state. At first I wanted to stay there, it was so exciting. But then I thought, "We can do this in Nepal too, slowly such things will become possible".

He, like an increasing number of travelers in both directions, did not go to India for wage labor, but for what we might call “belonging tourism” in which they went to see how the other half lived. In the other direction, Thangmi born and bred in India also began visiting Nepal regularly in the late 1990s as transportation improved and they became interested in cultural heritage for the purposes of their Scheduled Tribe application to the Indian state.

One of the things that Thangmi from India are usually most eager to see on visits to Nepal are old Thangmi houses with the *bampa* intact. Recently, a group of politically active Nepali Thangmi, many of whom are also part of the buy-back-the-land trend, have developed a proposal to make one of the oldest houses in Dolakha with its prominent *bampa* a museum and “cultural heritage site” [as the proposal calls it in English] for Thangmi everywhere. Funding has been sought from local, national and international organizations in both Nepal and India. For Thangmi from India, this idea would fulfill their desires for a link to ethnic territory and ancestral property, as well as being a recognizable cultural heritage site. For Nepali Thangmi, it would signify resilience, their slow but sure progress towards ending land-based exploitation and achieving social inclusion. For those who continue to move back and forth, this particular house and *bampa* would mark just one point of belonging among many.

**CHAPTER FIVE**  
**Organizing Ethnicity:**  
**Thangmi Associations, National Histories and Local Developments**

“These days, the organization is only concerned with making history, it doesn’t do ‘social welfare’”.<sup>1</sup>

– Nathu, former treasurer of the BTWA

We Thami people are in the darkness  
Let us now move towards light  
Let’s educate our children  
Let us develop the language and the culture of our ethnicity  
Rather than only hunting in the forest and  
Searching for underground fruits  
Let us use the Thami hands in development  
Let us Thami come together  
And join efforts in the development of our country  
Even though we are backward today  
We can go forward tomorrow.

– Excerpt from a poem entitled “We Must Open the Eyes of Our Soul” by Buddhi Maya Thami, which appears in a compilation of poetry in Nepal’s “national languages” (Kaila and Yonzon 2056 VS: 43)<sup>2</sup>

A faded black-and-white photograph, reproduced in various sepia shades, and in so many sizes and densities. Sometimes it is affixed to a wall, large and fully laminated against thick plyboard. At other times, it is pulled out of a wallet, paper thin, small and scrunched up among the detritus of daily life. On still other occasions, it is a smooth glossy print, carefully filed in an extra-long legal folder tied with string, sharing space with neatly typed documents or photocopies, which like the photograph seem to take on authority simply by virtue of repeated

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<sup>1</sup> Original Nepali: *Ajkal samajle khali itihās banaune bhaneko, ‘social welfare’ gardaina.*

<sup>2</sup> The original publication includes both a Thangmi language version of the poem, entitled “Manko Mise Khulaisa” and a Nepali version, “Manko Akha Kholnu Parchha”.

reproduction and respectful storage. The photograph is always presented with pride: an open right palm pointing respectfully, fingertips gingerly grasping the photograph's edges, a magnifying glass rummaged out of an old wooden cabinet or a mirrored steel *almirah* for effect [see Figure 5.1].

Whose faces can we make out there [see Figure 5.2]? Seated on the ascending levels of what appears to be a terraced field, 20 or so small children are in the front row, girls in pigtails, boys in grown-up laped jackets. Behind them stand four rows of adults, perhaps 30 in total—mostly men wearing *topi* (N) caps and the telltale flower necklaces of a formal event,<sup>3</sup> but also several women with heavy nose-rings and shawls draped over their heads—some smiling, even laughing (how different from the sober poses that characterize Thangmi portraiture today). In the center, one man holds a *madal* (N), the oblong drum whose rhythms mark most important events in Thangmi life.<sup>4</sup> In the upper right-hand corner, a man brings his hands together, offering the *namaste* greeting to the camera.

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<sup>3</sup> The *topi* is a cotton cap worn by men, and generally recognized as a symbol of Nepali identity (both as a national identity in Nepal, and an ethnic identity in India).

<sup>4</sup> As described in Chapter 2, the *madal* drum is also commonly played by people from many other groups of Nepali heritage.



Figure 5.1 BTWA member Shova displaying the 1943 photo of the Bhai Larke Thami Samaj, Darjeeling, November 2004



Figure 5.2 Close up of the 1943 Bhai Larke Thami Samaj photo





Figure 5.3 1936 photo of Mahakal, Darjeeling



Figure 5.4 1945 photo of Jyoti Thami School, as reproduced in *Niko Bachinte* (2003: 13)

It is 1943 in Darjeeling, at the first formal meeting of the Bhai Larke Thami Samaj (BLTS), the Thangmi organization which would evolve into the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association half a century later. Or so I am told, again and again, by the Thangmi men and women in Darjeeling who rush to show me this photo—whatever particular form their own copy takes—when I come calling with questions about Thangmi history. Could the man pictured here have imagined that six decades later his *namaste* would greet a researcher like me—or any number of bureaucrats, activists, and curious Thangmi themselves—proffered as black-and-white evidence of a certain kind of Thangmi history? Not just a history of migrant labor, but one of social organization, cultural practice, communal industriousness, and associational capacity.

In some interviews, this 1943 photo was presented as one among several in a family collection. The earliest of such photos shows a much larger group of similarly attired people splayed out across a hillside, with the penciled notation *Mahakal 1936* now affixed as an integral part of the photo itself [see Figure 5.3]. Here too, a man in the upper right-hand corner gestures *namaste* towards the camera. The latest such photo shows a smaller group of subjects against the backdrop of a wood-paneled interior, seated on chairs behind a black signboard with white letters spelling out *Jyoti Thami Pry-School 1945*. Both the children and adults are more formally dressed than in the other two photos, and the latter are adorned with *katha* (Tib), white



offering scarves in the Tibetan style. Although this photo is harder to make out than the others, it appears that bowler hats and knit caps have taken the place of *topi* for most of the men, while many of the women have uncovered heads. This time it is a woman, seated near the center, who offers *namaste*.

The *Mahakal 1936* photo, I am told, shows the first public Thangmi gathering in Darjeeling, although several people from other groups were present as well. The group has assembled for the Bhadau Purnima festival in August/September, celebrated as an annual shamanic festival across hill Nepal, and as Kalinchok Jatra by Thangmi in particular.<sup>5</sup> The photo shows the gathering at the inauguration of a new shrine at the Mahakal temple on top of Darjeeling's Observatory Hill, for which several community organizations have donated temple bells. One such bell has been sponsored by this group of Thangmi, although their organization does not yet have a name. At present, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so many thousands of bells are tangled across the ever-expanding Mahakal temple complex that no one can find this first Thangmi bell when I ask to see it, not even Latte Apa, who knows the hillside's labyrinth of worship sites well.<sup>6</sup> That the object cannot be located does not seem to matter, particularly in the Thangmi context, in which oral traditions must often stand in for

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<sup>5</sup> See Tautscher (2007) for details of this festival in Nepal, and Chapter 6 of this dissertation for a discussion of its relevance to contemporary Thangmi identity.

<sup>6</sup> In an interview published in Niko Bachinte, 83 year-old Nar Bahadur Thami claimed that this original bell had been stolen (Niko 2003: 53). A later bell donated in 1947 was by all accounts visible until several years ago, at which time it was replaced with a new bell donated by the BTWA.

tangible cultural objects (see Chapters 2 and 3). The act of pouring hard-earned wages into a cast bronze bell takes on the status of origin myth for many contemporary Thangmi activists in India, who locate some of the earliest evidence of Thangmi ethnic solidarity—or should we say evidence of their “existential presence” (cf. Chapter 2)—in this moment.

The 1943 image is complemented by an incontrovertible piece of evidence indicating that a named and registered organization existed by that year: a still-extant rubber stamp kept in a lock-box in the BTWA office in Darjeeling bazaar bears the year 1943, along with the Bhai Larke Thami Samaj name and logo. I am told that this photo shows, for the first time, an exclusively Thangmi group, which we can imagine has just anointed its members with flower necklaces to mark their organization’s registration as a legal entity. Clearly pleased with their accomplishment, the assembly still looks somewhat rag-tag and rustic, squatting on their haunches on an anonymous hillside. By the 1945 photo, they are seated on chairs inside their own school, where the Nepali language and other standard subjects were taught for several years before it was closed due to lack of funds in the early 1960s. The very fact that the Thangmi school existed, however briefly, tells us that there must be more than meets the eye in the historical narrative of a pan-Nepali national identity created through Nepali language literary production in Darjeeling during this era (Onta 1996a, 1996b, 1999; Hutt 1997, 1998; Chalmers 2003).

Taken together, these photos reveal something of the origins of Thangmi ethnic organizing.<sup>7</sup> They also serve as an inverted lens through which contemporary Thangmi activists view themselves and their history, refracting the multiple meanings of activism through half a century of Indian and Nepali nation-making. When Nathu, a self-made paragon of the Darjeeling Thangmi community who served as the BTWA's treasurer for many years, showed me the 1943 and 1945 photos with the typical pride and care described above, yet dismissed the present-day BTWA with the accusation that its leadership were only interested in "making history", what could he possibly mean?

### *Associational Histories*

This chapter looks at the historical trajectories and current dynamics of two Thangmi ethnic associations: what is now the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association in India (BTWA), and the Nepal Thami Samaj (NTS) in Nepal.<sup>8</sup> At the outset, I want to clarify that these organizations and their discursive products are not equivalent to the whole of "Thangmi ethnicity", "Thangmi identity", or "the Thangmi community" in India or

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<sup>7</sup> Chalmers concludes his thesis on the construction of Nepali national identity with a description of two photos from the 1920s, one from Kathmandu which shows a display of state power, and one from Darjeeling which shows a "small band of social activists ... organising the first Nepali Sarasvati puja". Chalmers suggests that the latter photo shows, "a public that, in its voluntary, cooperative institutionalisation of social values, was representing itself to itself" (2003: 290–291). Perhaps they were representing a pan-Nepali national identity to themselves, while the Thangmi of the photos I describe were representing a Thangmi ethnic identity to themselves.

<sup>8</sup> Both organizations have gone through several name changes. Except when discussing specific historical moments in which alternative names were used, I will use the abbreviations BTWA and NTS to refer to the two groups.

Nepal respectively, nor can we presume that the two organizations taken together demonstrate “Thangminess” in its entirety. As one Thangmi resident of Darjeeling who was disillusioned with the BTWA cautioned me, “While doing your research you must not focus exclusively on the association”. Activist discourses and performances enacted within the frame of an organization do not represent the whole of cultural practice or ethnic subjectivity in metonymic fashion. Rather, ethno-political activism is one of the many parallel and mutually constitutive fields of action within which Thangmi ethnicity has been produced over time, and one arena in which belonging has been asserted. In keeping with the synthetic theory of ethnicity-in-action outlined in earlier chapters, here I seek to demonstrate how participation (as well as non-participation) in such organizations can be a form of ritual action constitutive of social difference, the patterns of which must be analyzed in relation to the other forms of action in which Thangmi engage.

In describing the forces which have conditioned each organization’s historical trajectory, present shape, and status within both the Thangmi community as well as within local, national and global activist networks, I consider the specific effects of the consciousness-shaping political projects embedded in each country’s broader nation-making process. Ethnic associations, political organizations and other membership-based interest groups—all of which have been classed under the general rubric of “civil society” in

the academic and policy discourses of South Asia<sup>9</sup>—often serve as mediators between modern nation-states and their citizens. As such, ethnic organizations are particularly useful sites within which to observe the relationships between state policy and ethnic subjectivity, or in other words, the process of ethnicization. Relationships between states and individuals are often mediated by organizations, yet such relationships are not limited by the associational frame. It is in fact often in the disjunctures between organizational diktat and broader community sentiment that the dynamics of ethnicization become starkly evident, as we shall see below.

In the cross-border Thangmi context, the ways in which the imperatives of state policy are interpreted and internalized by community members may be observed—both by researchers and by Thangmi activists themselves—in particularly clear fashion since the case of the other country, as distilled in the structures and practices of the other organization, is always available for comparison. The shifting relationships between the BTWA and the NTS over time, and between diverse Thangmi individuals and each organization—sometimes supportive and mutually productive, at other times fraught with competition and frustration at perceived inequities and biases—

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<sup>9</sup> After providing a critique of the term's often vague use, Gellner provides the following concise definition of 'civil society': "associative (self-chosen) action that is neither part of the state nor undertaken for economic reasons" (forthcoming b). Other critical discussions of the concept in South Asia are provided by Kaviraj and Khilnani (2001) and Fuller and Bénéï (2001).

demonstrate the complex processes through which ethnicity is synthesized.

Through their cross-border communication with each other, Thangmi activists in both countries become aware of the varying prospects that their counterparts on the other side may have for promoting social welfare and moral reform, achieving community progress and economic development, and seeking political recognition (framed both in terms of rights and inclusion). I suggest that these five objectives have shaped the orientations of Thangmi ethnic organizations at different junctures of time and place. Furthermore, each of these objectives has entailed different conceptualizations of what Thangmi “culture” and “history” are and should be, and concomitantly varied approaches to harnessing ethnicity in the service of social change.

The five objectives listed above loosely reference the Nepali language discourses of *unnati* (improvement), *utthan* (upliftment), *pragati* (progress), *vikas* (development), *adhikar* (rights) and *samavesikaran* (inclusion).<sup>10</sup> Thangmi organizations have crystallized around each of these aspirational terms at various places and times, with each term signifying a slightly different ideological paradigm for realizing the consistent objective of forward movement towards an ideal society. These paradigms have been broadly construed within the overarching Nepali public sphere, and as such are not particularly

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<sup>10</sup> See Chalmers' (2003: 121, n. 139) for definitions of the terms listed here.

Thangmi, yet the ways in which Thangmi organizations have interpreted and implemented them have been shaped by the individual and communal Thangmi positionalities. As we shall see below, ideas about what constituted forward movement have shifted between time and place, sometimes dramatically, with attitudes towards culture and history repeatedly revised to keep pace. Yet all of these ideas have been quintessentially Nepali in their conceptualization and implementation. While certainly influenced by international discourses of modernity, communism, development, indigeneity and so forth, here I argue that experiences of ethnicization in both Nepal and Nepali-speaking India are the results of historical trajectories grounded in the broader processes of political consciousness formation specific to each nation-state, yet dependent upon circulation between them in the transnational Nepali public sphere.

### *Discourses and Practices of a Nepali Public Sphere*

Rhoderick Chalmers has convincingly shown that for those involved in the literary production of a Nepali identity in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Nepali public sphere, and the tools for achieving social transformation within it, were inherently transnational.<sup>11</sup> Taking an Andersonian approach that emphasizes the importance of print-capitalism, Chalmers shows how crucial ideas about the nature

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<sup>11</sup> Writing in 1934, Parasmani Pradhan eloquently summed up this fact, “As long as other Nepalis do not find out about what is done by Nepalis living in one corner our unnati shall not be achieved (Pradhan 1934: 34–35, as cited in Chalmers 2003: 111).

of Nepaliness emerged in both Nepal and India during the period from 1914–1940. Public expression was conditioned by the specific political and social environments of each country, yet the vehicle of literary journals enabled a transnational public to engage collaboratively in the discursive production of Nepaliness as a cultural entity which transcended the territorial borders of the Nepali nation–state. Beyond simply recognizing the analogy between the transnational production of Nepaliness that Chalmers describes and the transnational production of Thangminess which is the focus of this dissertation, I wish to suggest that both have occurred within the same public sphere, and as such, demonstrate different aspects of a shared historical process. It is in the Nepali public sphere that notions such as welfare, progress, development, and inclusion have emerged, accumulated multiple layers of meaning, and circulated across borders over time, influencing the particular ways in which Thangmi individuals and organizations have conceptualized themselves as agents of change.

In other words, we should not assume that ethnic identities often thought of as “Nepali” are bounded by Nepal’s political borders (or even more extremely, are defined entirely by a single region or village). Instead, analytically locating the production of such identities within an overarching, transnational Nepali public sphere allows us to see how the vagaries of identity politics and minority legislation in other countries—particularly in India and China, but increasingly elsewhere



as well—have come to bear significantly upon groups whose majority populations may be based in Nepal.<sup>12</sup> Although several anthropological works mention in passing the contributions that people influenced by experiences in Darjeeling made to ethnic projects in Nepal—take, for example, Ortner’s description of the Sherpa lama who returned to Khumbu to found a monastery after making his money in Darjeeling (Ortner 1989)<sup>13</sup>—the ways in which forms of public expression anchored in Darjeeling have influenced the process of ethnicization inside Nepal have not been systematically addressed in either academic work or the political discourse of Nepal’s *janajati* movement.<sup>14</sup> I suggest that just as Nepali nationalism was initially produced in large part in India, so too were ideas about ethnicity and how to use it to make claims on the state. This was not a one way street, however—in later periods, such ideas were internalized and reimagined inside Nepal in relation to the Nepali state, and then re-exported to communities of Nepali heritage in Darjeeling. Such processes, repeated again and again, comprise the multi-layered

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<sup>12</sup> The politics and policies of India of course impinge upon Nepali citizens in multiple ways through the strategic geopolitical relationship between the two countries; here I allude specifically to the ways in which Indian conceptualizations of ethnicity and ethnic activism have influenced such formations in Nepal.

<sup>13</sup> See also Macdonald’s (1975: 129) and Des Chene’s (1996) descriptions of Tamang and Gurung writings from Darjeeling in discussions that otherwise focus on these ethnic identities in Nepal. Guneratne (2002) and Krauskopf (2003) both discuss the cross-border influences from India on early Tharu organizing inside Nepal. A thorough reading of the ethnography of “Nepal” for such references would be a worthwhile project as part of a larger effort to more accurately historicize the links between ethnic activism in Nepal and India.

<sup>14</sup> Makito Minami’s article on Magar ethnic organizations is rare in explicitly recognizing the importance of such transnational connections: “... it seems that ethnic movements in Nepal originated in Darjeeling” (2007: 490).

feedback loop through which contemporary Thangmi ethnicity is produced. The persistence of Thangmi circular migration makes such cross-border relationships more pronounced than they are for many other groups, therefore providing a compelling case study of what may well be a more general set of dynamics.

At the same time, understanding the ways in which individual *ethnic* identities for groups of Nepali heritage have been produced over time in Darjeeling, Sikkim, and beyond, helps complicate the narrative of Nepali *national* identity production in India. Bringing into focus the experiences of individual groups of Nepali heritage in India within the broader formation of a pan-Nepali identity requires a conceptual expansion of the public sphere to include not only the discursive production of literary journals, but also the ritual practices, cultural performances, and other sorts of identity-producing public actions in which individuals have long engaged. Although Chalmers' critique of anthropology for neglecting written sources in Nepali is well-taken (2003: 295–296),<sup>15</sup> the reality remains that in order to understand what the “subaltern counterpublics” (Chalmers 2003: 290, citing Fraser 1992) of Darjeeling's literary heyday may have been thinking, we must move beyond the realm of the written word to

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<sup>15</sup> My work still falls short of the mark Chalmers sets, since I use only limited Nepali language sources, primarily those produced by Thangmi ethnic organizations. Few scholars are able to bring all methodological approaches to bear in a single study; my hope is that this work may be read in conjunction with those of Chalmers, Onta and Hutt to add an anthropological perspective to their well-argued descriptions of Darjeeling's literature and history, in the same way that their textually-based work has provided an important corrective to the previously strong ethnographic bias in considering the formation of ethnic identities in Nepal.

examine what members of groups like the Thangmi, who are rarely represented in writing, were actually doing.

In its early days, the Thangmi corner of the Nepali public sphere was created not through the circulation of publications, but rather through the circulation of people and their practices, although clearly these were articulated in relation to the discursively produced ideas that were accessible through the public speeches and gatherings of Darjeeling's intelligentsia. Through the spoken word (recall, for instance Silipitik's strong reaction to the speech he heard in Darjeeling, as described in Chapter 4), the highlights of literary discourse were communicated to those who could not read, and ideas of social welfare and moral improvement prompted slow but steady shifts in practice across the transnational Thangmi social formation.

It was only half a century later, in the 1990s, that substantial numbers of Thangmi themselves began to engage in literary production, as some began to question their own commitment to orality (see Chapter 3) and discovered the political power of print.<sup>16</sup> Between 1997–2004, four book-length collections of writing by Thangmi about themselves were produced (three in Nepal and one in India), along with three dictionaries (two in Nepal and one in India). By

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<sup>16</sup> Karna Thami, a leading member of the Darjeeling Nepali Sahitya Sammelan (Nepali Literary Council), is an exception to this chronology. Born in the 1940s, he has been active in the Darjeeling literary scene since the 1960s, as a writer of poetry and fiction. However, his writing did not explicitly address Thangmi identity or culture until 1999, when he published an article entitled "Thami Sanskritiko Kehi Ilak" ("Some Foundations of Thami Culture") in the journal *Nirman*. I am grateful to Rhoderick Chalmers for providing a digital copy of this article.

this time, other technologically-mediated forms of discursive representation that did not depend on literacy were also available, and the proliferation of audio (cassettes, CDs and radio) and video (VCD and DVD) has tempered the trend towards more extensive Thangmi literary production.<sup>17</sup> Regardless, all of these discursive products represent the *sakali* in different *nakali* modes with varying effects, each of which enable Thangmi to at once align themselves with broader discourses of social transformation while also (re)producing culture and (re)making history in the desired idiom of the moment.

In the sections that follow, the trajectories of Thangmi activism over time lead us back and forth across borders; through the discourses of social welfare, moral improvement, economic development, rights and inclusion; the media of speech, print, audio and video; and a range of attitudes towards culture, history and ethnicity. I conclude that in the ethnographic present of this work (1998–2008), culture and history were in the process of being reconceptualized as sacred objects within the politics of recognition, which came to represent the core object of identity itself. The day-to-day work of activism carried on within the presence of these objects (meetings, fundraising drives, preparing applications, and so forth) often took on the character of ritual action. Yet at key moments,

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<sup>17</sup> One new form of literary production began in early 2008, taking advantage of the new “Naya Nepal” pull-out section of the Nepali state’s official Gorkhapatra newspaper: a series of articles in the Thangmi language about Thangmi issues has appeared on a monthly basis, with about ten installments already published at the time of writing. Unfortunately I have not been able to include a thorough analysis of these writings in the present work.

certain individuals—often those most heavily invested in earlier paradigms for forward progress, like Nathu (who is cited in the epigraph to this chapter)—resist the reformulation of relationships between culture, history and activism that adopting new paradigms of progress entails. Such disparate voices from different corners of the transnational Thangmi social formation show how activist renditions of culture and history at any given place and time represent important, but in themselves incomplete, strands of Thangmi identity production, the full meanings of which only become evident when viewed as part of the whole.

### *Associational Histories in Darjeeling*

As demonstrated by the photos with which this chapter began, the history of Thangmi ethnic organizing begins in Darjeeling, where the Bhai Larke Thami Samaj was the first and only Thangmi organization anywhere for almost 40 years. This fact turns the logic of Nepal as the originary fount of Thangmi culture on its head (cf. Chapter 3), since if we view ethnic organizations as a site of cultural production it becomes clear that India is indubitably the “original source” of this strand of Thangmi culture. It was this aspect of Thangmi history that Nathu and other Darjeeling Thangmi took pride in as they showed me their photographs; these black-and-white images were their evidence of a long-standing, distinctive cultural reality, much as ritual practice and origin stories were for Thangmi in Nepal.

The fact that Thangmi organizations had their origin in India was in large part due to the fact that associational life was not a realistic option in Nepal before 1950, since the Rana state did not allow such “civil society” activities.<sup>18</sup> As Chalmers explains:

Institutions that took root in India enabled Nepalis to conceptualise and constitute themselves as a united community that could find expression through cultural and political organisation more or less independent of government. Here there is a major difference from the situation within Nepal, where comparable developments ... were primarily an expression of governmental will. (2003: 72)

It was this comparative openness that Thangmi migrants experienced in India which encouraged many of them to stay, or spend a large portion of their time in Darjeeling. As described in Chapter 4, the opportunity to form an organization to pursue their particular needs and interests created a sense of potential belonging which many Thangmi migrants quickly came to appreciate.

Identity-based organizing in Darjeeling dates to as early as 1907, when an informal organization submitted a memorandum to the Bengal Government demanding the creation of a “separate administrative set-up” in Darjeeling. Formalized as the Hillmen’s Association sometime between 1917 and 1919 (Subba 1992: 78–79), these early activists aimed to advance the social position of the multiple groups that were already beginning to identify themselves as

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<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that there were no forms of local organization in Nepal; village councils and other forms of community support organizations such as the Thakali *dhikur* are well-documented (W. Fisher 2001: 90–104). However, these were intended to regulate group-internal social affairs, not to mediate relationships between groups and the state in the sense that “civil society” connotes.

a unified “hill” community (Subba 1992: 78–79, Chalmers 2003: 208). Defining themselves as distinct from the Bengali “plains” community who had previously mediated most of Darjeeling’s interactions with the seat of power in colonial Calcutta, this group included members of the Nepali, Bhutia, and Lepcha communities, who put aside individual cultural differences to form an alliance based on their shared concerns as “hill” people.<sup>19</sup>

The demands of these early groups were couched in the rhetoric of social improvement (*unnati*), rather than political aspiration, leading Chalmers to term the “nascent Nepali public sphere ... decidedly apolitical” (2003: 204). Yet at the same time, Chalmers suggests that the focus on “status, livelihoods, or general well-being of established Indian Nepali communities ... can be interpreted as a political aspect of the urge for *jati* improvement” (2003: 203). He goes on to state that this transformation from concern for social welfare to political aspiration culminated in the founding of the All-India Gorkha League (AIGL) in Dehradun in 1923. This organization quickly established branches all over India and beyond (reaching as far as Bhutan, Burma and Fiji), and published several Nepali-language journals that worked

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<sup>19</sup> Chalmers makes the important point that even at this early stage the term ‘Nepali’ was used to designate the full range of groups of Nepali heritage, while the Bhutia and Lepcha were considered to be in a separate category, as indigenous inhabitants of the Darjeeling/Sikkim area. It is intriguing that Tibeto-Burman language-speaking, beef-eating groups of Nepali heritage such as the Tamang, Gurung, Magar, Rai, Limbu and Thangmi were included under the rubric ‘Nepali’, rather than classed with the Bhutia and Lepcha, which suggests that a sense of Nepali national identity already trumped particular cultural identities as criteria for self-identification in colonial Darjeeling.

to link, “specifically Nepali political concerns to the Indian freedom movement” (Chalmers 2003: 214). But the heyday of the AIGL lasted only a decade, and by 1933 it had stopped publishing and remained defunct until it was revived in Darjeeling in 1943.

That was also the year in which the Bhai Larke Thami Samaj (BLTS) was founded.<sup>20</sup> In the intervening years, Darjeeling citizens had begun to articulate their concerns in increasingly public forums, making the transition from a discourse of improvement (*unnati*) in a moral sense, through the education and gentrification of individuals, to the more political discourse of social transformation through the upliftment (*utthan*) of an entire community within the framework of the emerging Indian state. The Hillmen’s Association had suffered from internal tensions between the Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha member groups (Subba 1992: 81). In an effort to resolve these issues and adopt a more populist agenda, the Hill–People’s Social Union (HPSU) was founded in 1934 under the leadership of S.W. Laden La “by a large public convention attended by some six hundred representatives of different communities from across the Darjeeling district, including from villages and tea estates” (Chalmers 2003: 211, citing *Nebula* 1(1): 10). HPSU launched the journal *Nebula* (the initials of which stood for Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha) in 1935, which for the first time brought discussions of identity issues explicitly into the public sphere and

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<sup>20</sup> In his Niko Bachinte interview, 83 year–old Nar Bahadur explicitly states that the BLTS and AIGL were founded at around the same time (2003: 53).



linked them to broader political concerns regarding the place of Darjeeling within both the colonial administration and a future India.<sup>21</sup>

During the same period, various efforts to improve social welfare at the local level in Darjeeling culminated with the founding of the Gorkha Duhkha Nivarak Sammelan (GDNS) in 1932. With the explicit intention of linking “cultural promotion to social welfare” (Chalmers 2003: 202), GDNS founder Dhanvir Mukhiya built a public hall which “became the undisputed centre for Nepali theatrical productions while pursuing a mission to the poorer members of society by ... carrying out funeral rites for destitutes” (Chalmers 2003: 202). GDNS founder Mukhiya and HPSU founder Laden La did not get along, and Chalmers (2003: 202, 211) indicates that there was a sense of competition between these two early civil society organizations and their chosen modes of promoting social transformation: GDNS through “welfare”, or what we might now call “community-based” or “livelihood-based” activism, and HPSU through more overtly political, or “rights-based” activism that aimed to make claims on the emerging Indian state.

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<sup>21</sup> As Chalmers, Subba and others have noted, despite the pro-freedom position of the earlier Dehradun-based AIGL, the Darjeeling community was in a tricky position regarding the emerging Indian independence movement. They tried to leverage their ongoing demonstrations of loyalty to the imperial government in exchange for administrative independence from Bengal, but this strategy was not successful, leaving Darjeeling citizens with the worst of both worlds: no administrative autonomy, and a constant question mark over their loyalty to independent India, due to both their Nepaliness and their attempts to curry favor with the British. These are the historical underpinnings of the political turmoil Darjeeling continues to experience today.

*Bhai Larke Thami Samaj: Social Welfare for the Thangmi “Family”*

Despite the tensions at the leadership level of these two organizations, both were important influences in determining the shape of the Bhai Larke Thami Samaj. From Thangmi descriptions of the organization’s founding, however, we can see that its objectives were originally conceptualized along the lines of the GDNS model of social welfare, while its subsequent efforts to fundraise for the Jyoti Thami Primary School benefited from HPSU’s direct tutelage in how to approach the state.

Amrikan, whose story of migration was recounted in Chapter 4, explained that the initial objectives of the BLTS were to raise funds and provide an adequate number of participants for migrant Thangmi to conduct life cycle rituals, particularly for births and deaths:

At that time, we started the brother’s group... Even though we were not educated, we were able to run it well enough... However many brothers we were, in someone’s house there would be a birth ritual, or some other event, and all of the Thangmi would together contribute 50 rupees for a ‘rotating’ [in English] loan, and whoever’s turn it was would be called *larke*, in that way it became Bhai Larke Samaj.<sup>22</sup> Man Bahadur Thami from Kusipa, near Khopa [both villages in Dolakha], said, “let’s get the Thangmi organized and start a group”. And then there were 60 or 70 of us, then it was not so hard to do our death rituals.

Recalling Rana Bahadur’s narrative about the difficulty of conducting his father’s funerary rites (quoted in Chapter 3) in India, it is clear that meeting both the financial and social demands of such elaborate ritual

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<sup>22</sup> The origin of the term *larke* is murky. The literal meaning in Nepali appears to be “follower” or “subservient individual” (see Sharma 2057 VS: 1163), although here perhaps the BLTS founders intended it to mean something akin to “member”. Another possible interpretation is that it derives from the Hindi *ladke*, meaning “youth”.

practices was a major hardship for migrant Thangmi. In most cases, migrants to Darjeeling were far away from their own families, who would have provided both the human and material resources to conduct the *mumpra* (T: funerary rituals) at home (see Chapter 7 for details on this ritual cycle). In several interviews, I was told that before the establishment of the BLTS, many migrant Thangmi were unable to conduct death rituals at all, either leaving Darjeeling to return home when momentous personal events took place, or simply carrying on with their routine of daily labour and failing to conduct such rituals at all. One further option was to approach GDNS to help with the conduct of life cycle rituals, which some did, but the problem with this course of action was that there was no scope for conducting a Thangmi ritual *per se* within GDNS's walls; rather, the organization prescribed the ritual format and called its own in-house Hindu *pandit* to officiate.<sup>23</sup>

None of these options were really satisfactory, particularly because there were in fact several Thangmi guru working as wage laborers in Darjeeling who could have been called upon to conduct funerary and other rites. With the exception of the few families who had consciously chosen the path of assimilation to the Hindu

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<sup>23</sup> As Chalmers explains, for *unnati* proponents, "The "proper" approach to celebrating religious festivals was also a focus of moral concern, one which gained more attention as public celebrations of particular *pujas* became a highly visible form of community cultural representation" (2003: 154). In addition, "Active participation in Nepali civil society was not necessarily open to all those who might think of themselves as Nepali. The flagship projects of the civic-minded ... could best be supported by those who could contribute intellectually or financially: while the poor and destitute were to benefit from the GDNS, it was largely the great and good who managed it" (2003: 215).

mainstream (such as the Tumsong tea plantation overseer's family described in Chapter 4), these guru would have been the preferred ritual officiants for most Thangmi. However, gurus who, like everyone else, were struggling to make ends meet, were unwilling to lose their wages from a day of work unless the sponsoring family could compensate them for their time. Back in Nepal, both gurus and laypeople alike were part of the same informal economy where labor was compensated in kind, rather than in cash. Without the resources of a kinship network to provide both the required cash and the necessary clan and out-clan members participants to fill their respective ritual roles, conducting Thangmi rituals seemed like an impossibility.

In this context, drawing upon GDNS's social welfare model, but moving out of its pan-Nepali Hindu ritual sphere, the founders of the BLTS established a fictive kin network that enabled both the financial and social needs of migrant Thangmi to be met. The overarching idiom in which BLTS members conceptualized their participation in the organization was that of kinship, as the emphasis on *bhai*—brothers—in the organization's title underscored. However, their preferred family was an exclusively Thangmi one, not the pan-Nepali "family" invoked in the parallel kinship metaphors of HPSU and various Nepali writers.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Chalmers (2003: 255–256) describes how kinship metaphors, particularly of "brothers" and "sisters" were pervasively used to describe the Nepali community in the first phase of identity building from approximately 1914–1920. However, he suggests that such language fell out of common usage by the 1930s: "Later Indian Nepali journals were generally content with social and ethnic interpretations of Nepaliness which did not need to be supported by the language of brotherhood" (2003: 56). This analysis lends credence to the assertion that the Thangmi choice of kinship terminology to name their organization in 1943 was not just a mimetic use of

Basant, the BTWA general secretary from 1997–2003, explained that although his father had been raised by the GDNS orphanage since its first year of operation, GDNS could not replace a Thangmi ‘family’:

My father lost his parents when he was five. GDNS gave him a place to live, and he was the caretaker of the hall until he died. I grew up there too, and look, my sister and her family still live there. We owe everything to that organization. They would say, “We are all one family, one *jati*. If any one of our members succeeds, we all succeed.” They taught my father how to be Nepali, but not how to be Thangmi. For that we needed the Bhai Samaj.

Although this description is filtered through a generation of social and political experience and should not be taken to represent verbatim the views of Basant’s father, such sentiments were echoed by several older Thangmi in interviews: although *social* welfare could be conceptualized in broad, pan–Nepali terms, *cultural* welfare required an exclusively Thangmi organization. Drawing upon the GDNS model, which functioned at the level of the Nepali *social* sphere, BLTS brought the notion of welfare to bear at the *cultural* level at which ethnic identities were still created through ritual practice in the company of kin—those bound together by shared descent, if not exactly immediate family—not through the discourse of pan–Nepali ethnic unity alone.

Once supported by the organizational framework of the BLTS, culture quickly became a source of social and economic capital as the BLTS considered how to parlay their successful scheme of rotating

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terms used by other organizations, but rather a clear statement that despite the rhetoric of pan–Nepali unity, real kinship was still to be found in the company of one’s ethnic compatriots.

loans for ritual practice into something more broad-reaching. In his description of the Thangmi encounter with the HPSU, Amrikan alludes to the class dynamics which belied the umbrella organization's populist image, as well as to the first deployments of cultural performance as a political tool:

*Nebula* came along later, and the *thulo manche* (N: big people) we knew found out about it. Our secretary went to ask them for help in approaching the government to ask for money since we didn't have enough to run the school...They told us to show our dances and songs, and play *deusi*.<sup>25</sup> We asked the ministers for help, that's how we ran the school. They gave us 500–600 rupees a month to run it ... but for that we had to go dance and sing. At that time the three *jat* [presumably Nepali, Bhutia, Lepcha] would be called and we were also included. Since the Bhotes could only perform *dangdangdungdung* [a disparaging imitation of Bhutia cultural practice], we were asked to perform the *maruni* dance and play the *madal*, and for that they gave us money to run our organization.

Like many Thangmi, Amrikan referred to the HPSU as *Nebula*, conflating the name of the organization with the name of the journal it published, in what appears to have been fairly common usage (Subba 1992: 83).<sup>26</sup> His assertion that *Nebula*/HPSU was founded after the BLTS, a claim seconded by Nar Bahadur's published statement that, "even before that organization [NeBuLa], our ethnic organization existed" (2003: 53), appears to be historically questionable.<sup>27</sup> Even if

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<sup>25</sup> Turner explains: "A festival which begins on the fifth day of the *tiwar* festival (= *diwali*). On this day children and others come round to give blessings and receive alms: the leader says something or other ... the others cry in chorus *deusi*" (1997 [1931: 317]). In both modern Nepal and Nepali-speaking areas of India, *deusi* performances are commonly used to raise funds for social welfare organizations.

<sup>26</sup> The same conflation appears in *Niko Bachinte*, where Rajen refers to the organization as NeBuLa in his interview with Nar Bahadur (Niko 2003: 53). See also Bagahi and Danda (1982).

<sup>27</sup> Nar Bahadur claims to have been a member of both HPSU and BLTS.

we accept that the 1936 Mahakal photo shows a Thangmi meeting, this is still two years after the HPSU public convention was held. However, it may well be the case that there was already an informal Thangmi network in existence at the time that the Thangmi *came to know* about HPSU, regardless of when the latter was actually founded. Amrikan's statement that it was the *thulo manche*—those of higher status, in this case, probably referring to those with higher education—who first learned about HPSU's existence suggests that the organization may not have been accessible to many Thangmi wage labourers. Moreover, an examination of the membership of HPSU's executive committee and governing bodies, as well as of the editorial board for *Nebula* (as reproduced in Subba 1992: 81–83), shows Bhutia, Lepcha, Gurung, Brahmin, Chhetri, Rai, Newar, Limbu, and perhaps Magar names,<sup>28</sup> but there are no Thangmi names mentioned. While this is hardly surprising given the very small Thangmi population numbers, it still helps explain why the Thangmi may have felt that HPSU could not fully represent their political aspirations, just as GDNS could not cater to all of their cultural needs.

As described by Amrikan above, the BLTS secretary first approached the HPSU leadership in order to ask how to request financial help from the government. However, HPSU did not recommend that the Thangmi approach the government with an

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<sup>28</sup> The name “Thapa”, held by several members, can designate either Chhetri or Magar.

explicitly political agenda, rather suggesting that they use their cultural resources to secure financial support. In Amrikan's account, Thangmi culture was seen as a particularly marketable brand of the pan-Nepali performance genre. Perhaps due to its lively *mada* drumbeats, Thangmi cultural performance was viewed as a cultural resource for the Darjeeling community as a whole (in contrast to Bhutia cultural forms, which according to Amrikan did not appeal to outside audiences so easily). In exchange for performing at cultural events, Thangmi received funding for their school, first from the HPSU, and later through a municipal grant.<sup>29</sup>

At a time when there were apparently few other active organizations representing individual ethnic groups of Nepali heritage,<sup>30</sup> it is difficult to imagine how the Thangmi, with their tiny population numbers and relatively low economic status, could have maintained an active association without the direct support of a more

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<sup>29</sup> A 1955 letter from Man Bahadur, the BLTS secretary, to T. Wangdi, the Deputy Minister of Tribal Welfare for West Bengal, states, "We are getting Darjeeling Municipal grant-in-aid of Rs. 74 monthly" and provides additional details about itemized costs, but asks for additional funding since this is not adequate.

<sup>30</sup> Historical information about individual ethnic organizations in Darjeeling is hard to come by without doing detailed primary research in the privately held archives of those organizations and their successors. At present, I have only been able to do this for the Thangmi. Citing sources published in Japan and Sikkim that I have not seen, Makito Minami suggests that several other organizations were founded during the same period: "Ethnic movements among Nepali migrants to Darjeeling began in the years between 1920 and 1940, when the Kirantis, Newars, Damais, Viswakarmas (Kamis), and Tamangs, all formed their own ethnic/caste associations. According to Kano (2001: 247), the Sherpa Buddha Association was established in Darjeeling in 1924, while a Limbu association called Yakthung Hang Chumlung was founded in Kalimpong in 1925 (Subba 2002: 9). The Mangars also formed the Mangar Samaj Darjeeling (Mangar Society Darjeeling) a little later in 1939" (2007: 490). Martin Gaenzle also mentions several Rai organizations founded in the 1920s and 1930s (forthcoming). Comprehensive histories of such ethnic organizations in Darjeeling are important topics for future research.



experienced and well-resourced organization. Viewed as a non-political, cultural organization, which could contribute cultural resources to overall pan-Nepali political goals, the BLTS was perceived as an additional resource for, rather than a threat to, pan-Nepali hegemony.

Moreover, the flagship school project of the BLTS promoted the ideals of *unnati* by providing education to poor Thangmi children—in Nepali and English, but notably not in Thangmi. In line with the pan-Nepali ideologies in ascendance at the time, rather than teaching the Thangmi language as a subject in itself, the organization strove to create Thangmi children assimilated to the Nepali-speaking mainstream. As Basant explained in the pages of *Niko Bachinte*, the school, which had up to 80 students at its height, was founded “with a view towards minimizing the backwardness of the Thami community” (2003: 11).<sup>31</sup> This statement echoes a 1955 letter to T. Wangdi, Deputy Minister of Tribal Welfare for the state of West Bengal, signed by Man Bahadur, the BLTS founder and secretary, in which he appealed for additional funding for the school on the basis that, “We Thamis are backward in our Nepali community”.

In this sense, although BLTS membership was based on belonging to a particular ethnic group which felt itself to be somewhat marginalized within the broader Nepali community, the organization

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<sup>31</sup> See Chalmers (2003: 130) on the discourse of backwardness in the Nepali public sphere as a whole, Galanter (1984: 121) on the legal definition of it in India, and Jenkins on its more recent interpretations (2003: 145–147).

did not promote ethno-political agendas in the contemporary sense. The primary objective was to improve the welfare of the migrant Thangmi family through community-based projects, and the organization was not encouraged to develop its own direct relationship with political powers beyond the local level. This relationship remained mediated by non-Thangmi, through the figure of a man known as “King Kong” (ostensibly due to his large size), who helped the BLTS keep accounts and manage their correspondence since few of their members were educated. King Kong seems to have acted as a liaison between the Thangmi and other organizations active at the time, charged with the dual responsibilities of ensuring that the BLTS remained active and its members available to provide cultural performances, and keeping an eye on the BLTS membership to make sure that they did not develop an independent political agenda that might challenge the emerging political dominance of a united Nepali identity and its representative organizations.

It was within this historical context that many contemporary Thangmi activists claim that their predecessors turned down the opportunity to be listed as a Scheduled Tribe in the early 1950s, during the first post-independence phase of classification carried out by the Indian state.<sup>32</sup> As one Thangmi who claimed to have been involved in BLTS discussions over this issue at the time put it:

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<sup>32</sup> Galanter (1984: 149) explains that: “In 1950, the President promulgated the list of Scheduled Areas and a list of Scheduled Tribes, apparently by making some additions to the 1935 list of Backward Tribes.” The Bhutia, Lepcha, and Tibetan populations of

When the idea of Scheduled Tribes first arose, the government asked if we wanted to be listed. But the Tamang had refused, saying that they were too important to be seen as a backwards group, and we Thangmi followed suit. We wanted to be seen as Indian citizens with Nepali heritage, not some little tribe.<sup>33</sup>

With this decision, the Thangmi chose to cast their lot with the Nepali community as a whole, rather than with the Bhutia and Lepcha, both of whom were indeed classified as Scheduled Tribes in 1950. Desiring to be identified as full-fledged, modern Indian citizens of Nepali heritage, Thangmi sought to distance themselves from the connotations of backwardness that the tribal designation carried at the time.

“Who could have guessed that this would turn out to be a mistake?” continued the same speaker cited above. By the 1990s, classification as a Scheduled Tribe had become the primary objective for Thangmi political activists in India. With the death of BLTS founder Man Bahadur Thami in the mid-1960s, the first wave of Thangmi ethnic organizing ended. The BLTS fell into disarray and the school closed, suggesting that Man Bahadur’s charismatic leadership was an essential ingredient in the Thangmi organization’s early success. The association was only fully resuscitated in the early 1990s in the form of the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association, which despite its name, was

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Darjeeling were included in the 1950 list. I have not been able to locate documentary evidence that the Thangmi were actually offered this status.

<sup>33</sup> Nar Bahadur (Niko 2003: 53) suggests that the Thangmi in fact asked for recognition from the state of India as a *janajati* group in 1955. However, this usage of the term *janajati* in the context appears anachronistic, and demonstrates the influence of ethnic discourse from Nepal within India. Even if he meant that they asked for “tribal” status, Nar Bahadur’s assertion appears contentious in light of the claims of several of his contemporaries that they did not want to be included in the tribal category at that time.

no longer primarily interested in familial and communal “welfare”. In the mean time, Thangmi aspirational ideologies had changed, bringing into focus newfound desires for recognition and rights at the national and transnational levels, along with new techniques for making history.

### *Marxist Notions of Progress in Nepal*<sup>34</sup>

Had notions of social transformation and ideologies of aspiration changed so radically during the intervening half century for Thangmi participants in all corners of the Nepali public sphere? Answering this question requires a journey back across the border to Nepal for an examination of the origins of Thangmi organizing there.

Chalmers suggests that in the latter half of the twentieth century, the transnational nature of the early Nepali public sphere began to give way to increasingly localized political formations:

Ironically, this can be attributed to the rapid expansion of popular involvement in politics both in India and Nepal which is evident from the mid-1930s: while in one sense this represented the consummation of the public sphere as it finally allowed the fulfilment of aspirations fanned by the new potentials of print-capitalism, it also marked its downfall as diverse political goals in separate arenas necessarily overshadowed earlier shared cultural endeavours. (2003: 21)

At least until the end of Rana rule with King Tribhuvan’s 1951 return to Nepal’s throne, and the ensuing advent of democracy, political agendas continued to be crafted in India by expatriate activists before

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<sup>34</sup> This section draws substantially upon Shneiderman (2003). Here I can only sketch the broad contours of the relationship between Thangmi ethnic consciousness and a broader, largely communist political consciousness, but the details will be fleshed out in two forthcoming publications.

being tried on the ground in Nepal. This was very much the case for communism, which made its first appearance in the Nepali public sphere in 1949 when Pushpa Lal Shrestha founded the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) in Calcutta.<sup>35</sup> Pushpa Lal and his supporters returned to Nepal in 1951 after the fall of the Ranas, but were quickly banned in 1952 for their violent activities. They operated underground for four years between 1952 and 1956, during which time they focused primarily on class issues, such as redistribution of land, tenancy rights, and the abolition of compulsory unpaid labour (Hachhethu, 2002: 34–5). The CPN was legalized again in the late 1950s, and stood in the 1959 elections, before King Mahendra terminated Nepal’s first experiment with democracy in 1960 and introduced the partyless panchayat system. All political parties were once again banned, and the CPN and NC alike went underground. Mahendra’s panchayat ideology emphasized a hegemonic vision of nationalist development, framed in terms of *vikas*,<sup>36</sup> which intersected with the rapidly increasing presence of international development organizations in Nepal. But in the decade during which Pushpa Lal’s CPN had been active before the panchayat curtain fell, the communist notion of progress, or *pragati*—in the sense of class struggle within the Marxist framework of historical materialism—had already left its mark on much of rural Nepal. This Marxist notion of forward social movement was the

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<sup>35</sup> The Nepali Congress (NC) party had been founded in 1947 in Banaras.

<sup>36</sup> See Pigg (1992, 1993) on the ideological impact of development discourse and practice in Nepal.

one which most prominently shaped the first Thangmi organizations in Nepal.

In what might at first appear to be an anomaly, one of the first formally constituted Thangmi organizations was located not in Dolakha or Sindhupalchok, where the majority of Nepal's Thangmi population resided, but in Jhapa, the eastern Tarai district that borders West Bengal, where the Thangmi population at the time could not have been more than 300.<sup>37</sup> Named Niko Pragatisil Thami Samuha (NPTS)—Our Progressive Thami Group—it was founded in 1981, although one of its publications claims that members had been meeting informally since 1968 (Patuko 2054 VS: 87).<sup>38</sup> Shortly thereafter, between 1971 to 1973, Nepal's Jhapeli activists (who were consolidated into the Marxist–Leninist, or ML, branch of the CPN in 1978) began their campaign of attacks on large landlords in the name of class struggle, taking their ideological cues from the radical Naxalite movement then in full swing just across the border in West Bengal (Hachhethu 2002). The small but significant Jhapa Thangmi community (as well as Thangmi resident in the neighboring Tarai districts of Udayapur and Sunsari) fell within the sphere of Jhapeli/Naxalite political influence, and NPTS was formed with the clear agenda of harnessing Thangmi

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<sup>37</sup> The 1999 Dolakhareng publication estimates the Jhapa Thangmi population to be 300 based on a 1997–1998 survey (Reng 1999: 38).

<sup>38</sup> Niko means “our” in Thangmi, equivalent to the Nepali *hamro*. It is often used in Thangmi organization and publication titles that are otherwise in Nepali, apparently as a symbolic marker of Thangminess.

concerns about basic subsistence to a larger communist agenda (Patuko 2054 VS).<sup>39</sup>

Jhapa was an important intermediate point in the routes of circular migration between Thangmi villages in Nepal and Darjeeling. With several Thangmi settlements located very close to the main international border crossing along the highway at Kankarvitta (in Nepal)/Raniganj (in India), Thangmi moving in both directions often spent a night or two with relatives in Jhapa.<sup>40</sup> The Nepali government's malaria eradication program in the 1950s (funded in part by USAID) included land and cash incentives for families to settle in previously uninhabitable Tarai areas like Jhapa, and several Thangmi families had taken up this offer. Most of these settlers were from the village of Lapilang in Dolakha, and had long participated in circular migration themselves. Intriguingly, even a few families that had been settled in

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<sup>39</sup> This stands in contrast to other early ethnic associations in Nepal, which were founded on a social welfare model more akin to the BLTS and other such groups in India. William Fisher explains, "The first formal Thakali organization was the Thakali Samaj Sudhar Sangh founded in Pokhara in 1954... Before 1990 formal ethnic associations were not common in Nepal. The few that were organized—for example, the Tharu Kalyan Karini Sabha, which was first registered in 1950; the Nepal Tamang Ghedung, which was first formed in 1956; the Newar associations; the Nepal Bhasha Manka Kala, organized in June 1979; and the Nepal Magar Langali Sangh, formed in 1982—had to demonstrate the social nature of their activities and establish that they were not political or communal organizations" (2001: 139). See also Hangen: "Many organizations that have played a key role in the post-1990 ethnic movement were formed between 1951 and 1960 ... These organizations promoted social cohesion within single ethnic groups and the preservation of a group's cultural practices... These organizations sought to reform their own communities rather than the state" (2007: 15).

<sup>40</sup> Later, a second road link was built further north at Pashupatinagar in Ilam district, and Thangmi also transited through that point. Although crossing at Pashupatinagar cut down on travel time, the roads were far inferior to those further south, and many Thangmi continued using the route through Jhapa. I was never able to cross at Pashupatinagar myself since foreign passport holders were not allowed through that border checkpoint.

Darjeeling for several generations (including a branch of the Tumsong tea plantation family, who were also originally from Lapilang) were attracted by the offer of free land inside Nepal, and they made use of the Nepali citizenship papers that they had maintained in order to return to Nepal (as described in Chapter 4), albeit to the Tarai rather than to their ancestral villages in the hills. All of this meant that from its earliest days, despite its small size, the Jhapa Thangmi community played a key role in the feedback loop of cross-border Thangmi communication due to strong kinship links with both Dolakha and Darjeeling.

It should come as no surprise, then, that in 1981, the same year that the NPTS was founded in Jhapa, another Thangmi organization was founded in the village of Lapilang, calling itself Lapilang Gaun Ekai Samiti (LGES)—United Lapilang Village Committee. Although the organization's name does not mark it as explicitly Thangmi, the present-day Nepal Thami Samaj claims LGES as the first Thangmi organization established in Dolakha (NTS Organizational Profile).<sup>41</sup> Lapilang village has a majority Thangmi population (ICDM 1999), and unlike in Jhapa where the Thangmi were a tiny minority, in Lapilang it may have seemed unnecessary, and perhaps overly provocative, to include the name of the ethnic group in the organization's name. In addition, although the individuals that the LGES sought to mobilize

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<sup>41</sup> Available online at <<http://www.geocities.com/thamisociety/gatibidhi.html>>.



shared a Thangmi identity, their rallying cry was that of class struggle, not ethnic inclusion.

By 1981, in addition to hearing about the activities of the Jhapeli branch of the CPN–ML through their extended kin network in Jhapa, the Thangmi of Lapilang had come under the direct influence of CPN–ML cadres working underground in their area.<sup>42</sup> The Thangmi village of Piskar—located just to the west of the present-day boundary between Dolakha and Sindhupalchok, but at the time in the same administrative region (East 2)—had been chosen as a prospective base area by CPN–ML operatives soon after the party’s formal establishment in 1978.<sup>43</sup> Amrit Kumar Bohara, CPN–ML leader for of the Bagmati zone,<sup>44</sup> was originally from Piskar himself, and chose it as a model “village of the masses” for his party’s activities. Bohara, along with Asta Laxmi Shakya (who later became his wife), and a third cadre, Madhav Paudel, based their activities in Piskar’s Thangmi households, but also traveled widely in the area to other Thangmi villages such as Lapilang, Alampu, Suspa and beyond.

The communist rhetoric that these political activists introduced resonated well with existing Thangmi concerns about exploitation and

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<sup>42</sup> In 1991 the CPN–ML merged with the CPN (Marxist) to become the CPN (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN–UML).

<sup>43</sup> Hangen explains that in 1979, “Leading up to a referendum to determine whether the people of Nepal wanted to continue the panchayat system or institute a multi-party system, the state allowed political parties and organizations to be openly active” (2007: 15).

<sup>44</sup> Bohara became a central government minister in 1994–1995, and Acting General Secretary of the CPN–UML for a short period after the Constituent Assembly elections in 2008.

oppression at the hands of local landlords. When Bohara returned to his home village in 1978, he found that there was already what a CPN–ML publication called a “smoldering class hatred” (HPP 1984: 7) among the Thangmi farmers, which could be usefully aligned with the broader purposes of the nascent communist movement. As the narratives of migration presented in Chapter 4 demonstrated, Thangmi villagers had long been aware of their exploitation at the hands of landowners, and many had decided to settle in Darjeeling, or at least spend much of their time there, in order to escape such oppression. Many older Thangmi who had remained in Nepal told me how they were involved in small-scale acts of resistance against their landlords long before they had ever heard of communism. However, their frustrations had not previously been linked to a clear ideological agenda that extended beyond local power structures, or provided an organizational framework within which to conceptualize themselves as agents of change.

The fact that communism was the primary catalyst through which many Thangmi in Nepal began to develop political consciousness vis-à-vis the nation-state had important long-term implications for the group’s ability to organize along ethnic lines, as well as for their attitudes towards culture and history as political categories.<sup>45</sup> At the highest level of abstraction, the CPN has always

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<sup>45</sup> This may well be the case for other groups in Nepal as well, but here I only have evidence for the Thangmi case. Additional research on such historical relationships between ethnic and class identities would help illuminate current political dynamics in Nepal.

espoused an orthodox communist line when it comes to the evolutionary model of historical materialism, which suggests that ethnic, gender and other group identities are simply artifacts of class hierarchy, which will disappear naturally as a consequence of class struggle.<sup>46</sup> The practical application of this ideology on the ground meant that CPN–ML cadres like Bohara, Shakya and Paudel—a Chhetri, Newar and Bahun respectively—engaged in discourses and practices of domestication towards the Thangmi, whom they saw as wild and unsocialized. The objective was to cultivate loyal rural cadres who had direct lived experience of class oppression, while at the same time subjugating the particularities of their Thangmi ethnic identity to meet the demands of an emerging socialist modernity in which culture took a distinctly secondary role.

In a 2004 interview with me, Shakya described her early experiences of living with the Thangmi as follows:

They never took a bath. They did not know that the pot they cooked food in should be cleaned. After they cooked the food they would keep it just like that and there would be flies all over the pot the whole day. In the evening they would pour water in it, cook and eat. I would stay inside and clean the pots. They would go to the fields to work, and to collect fodder for the animals. When they came home in the evenings they would see everything clean ... That's how they learned. I combed their hair and they learned that hair should be combed ... There was no soap to wash clothes. I taught them how to wash clothes. I did not teach

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<sup>46</sup> See Connor (1984) for an overview of these issues in Marxist–Leninist ideology. Mukta Tamang has raised these issues in an analysis of the CPN's policy documents on caste and ethnic issues over time, arguing that, "despite the policy formulation during the formative periods, the issue of caste and ethnicity remained marginal in the party discourse and practice in the whole history of the communist political movement until 1990" (2004: 2).

only about politics because there was a need to change the economic situation, the social situation, their ideas, and their lifestyle ... They ate beef and we taught them that they should not eat it.

Shakya's social work appears to have been well intentioned, arising out of a genuine concern for the welfare of the people she encountered. But there was also an element of ethnic prejudice in it that saw most Thangmi traditions and habits as unclean and unacceptable, rather than as fundamental aspects of Thangmi life. This is most evident in Shakya's pride in teaching Thangmi villagers not to eat beef. While the consumption of beef was and remains an important marker of Thangmi identity, it had no place within a communist nationalism shaped by dominant Hindu ideals.

Coupled with the general communist belief that class ultimately trumped ethnicity, such specific prejudices led to a situation in which many Thangmi in Nepal came to feel that cultural practices with which they were familiar in *sakali* forms were incommensurable with effective political participation at the national level. This did not mean that culture should be stamped out in its entirety—it could in fact be instrumentalized in a range of *nakali* performances as an effective tool in the service of particular ideological agendas, and in this sense was worth maintaining as a resource—but rather that practice *per se* was best bracketed off as a local field of action separate from the national field of politics. Everyone participated in cultural practice in some way without even trying, in the sense that most Thangmi in Nepal continued to speak their own language and most called upon guru as

primary ritual practitioners, but not everyone participated actively in politically-oriented representational performance. Only some Thangmi became explicitly involved in political activism, and until the 1990s, those individuals tended to de-emphasize their ethnic affiliation and cultural particularity in the context of national party politics.

Jagat Man, a Thangmi man from Lapilang who was involved in founding the LGES, and remains both a CPN-UML and NTS member today, explained:

Through communism we learned that although we Thangmi were poor, we were not poor because we were Thangmi. We were poor because we lived in a feudal system where the rich exploited us to consolidate their wealth. So we had to challenge them on the basis of class. Anyway, this was the only way during the panchayat time, when you could not talk about ethnic cultures or languages. At that point, these were not part of our political agenda. But Thangmi felt ashamed to talk to people from other groups, and could talk more easily to each other, so it was logical for us to form a Thangmi organization even though our goal was the advancement of the party, not the ethnicity.

In this way, the earliest Thangmi organizations in Nepal were influenced by a particularly socialist view of how to achieve forward progress. Making use of Thangmi kinship and community networks was good strategy in the name of achieving *pragati*—"progress", in the evolutionary sense of historical materialism—but ultimately ethnicity was only a strategic entry point into larger issues of class.

For many Thangmi, such logic was forever unsettled through the momentous events of the Piskar Massacre in January 1984. For others, the killing of two Thangmi villagers by government forces at a local

festival in Piskar simply hardened their commitment to the communist cause.<sup>47</sup> Over the next several months, over 300 villagers were arrested for their alleged participation in this event, with some held in custody for up to three years without trial. That the government's excuse for the police action was the fact that Thangmi villagers were singing revolutionary songs at the annual Maghe Sangkranti festival at Mahadevsthan, a local temple, shows how the framework of a Thangmi cultural event had been deployed in the service of a particular political agenda, with devastating effects.<sup>48</sup>

On the one hand, this experiential linkage between cultural performance and political violence led to a hardening of Thangmi ethnic consciousness as an oppressed group vis-à-vis both the state and the CPN-ML party, whom some Thangmi felt had used them as sacrificial scapegoats (Bohara, Shakya and Paudel were unharmed in the massacre). On the other hand, the Piskar incident compelled a more cautious separation of the domain of culture from that of politics thereafter. Many Thangmi came to fear that participation in the public events at which much cultural practice unfolded—territorial deity festivals, funerary rites, wedding parties—constituted a serious risk to themselves and their families, both because “Thangmi culture” had now been equated with subversive politics in the eyes of the state, and because simply gathering in a large group in public could draw

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<sup>47</sup> I have described this event and its aftermath in detail in Shneiderman (2003).

<sup>48</sup> See human rights reports about the event from Amnesty International (1987) and INSEC (1995).

unwanted attention.<sup>49</sup> Cultural practice took a turn towards the more insular, with the reactivation of many long-standing strategies to avoid recognition (described in Chapter 1), particularly by those who were not deeply invested in communist ideology already. For many of those already involved with communism, the Piskar Massacre confirmed their commitment to the Marxist path towards progress and provided an entrée onto the national political stage, but only at the cost of downplaying their Thangminess. The CPN-ML eulogized Ile and Bir Bahadur as communist, rather than Thangmi martyrs, and little was done to actually compensate their families or ensure the welfare of Thangmi as a group, despite repeated requests to the government.<sup>50</sup>

The cumulative effect of the 1984 events in Piskar was the dissolution of the first Thangmi organizations in Nepal, and an irrevocable polarization of the community into a number of camps, each of which had its own views on the relationship between culture, politics and progress. This post-1984 factionalization, and the ambivalence towards cultural practices and performances that it engendered (were they resources to be deployed in the quest for progress? were they forms of resistance against a violent state? or were they just what people did because they were Thangmi, in a domain entirely separate from that of politics?) meant that it would be more than a decade until some Thangmi began to consider seriously the

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<sup>49</sup> Such fears re-emerged in new forms during the civil conflict between the Maoists and state forces from 1996–2006.

<sup>50</sup> These grievances are described in detail in *Dolakhareng* (Reng 1999: 65–68).

prospect of crossing political lines in order to organize around ethnicity.<sup>51</sup>

*Converging on Culture: A New Political Strategy*

1990 marked a watershed year for the future of Thangmi ethnic politics in both Nepal and India, albeit for different reasons.<sup>52</sup> In Nepal, the first Jana Andolan (People's Movement) brought about the end of absolute monarchy, with King Birendra lifting the ban on political parties and accepting a new constitution. The formal end of the panchayat system permitted social inequities to be expressed in an explicitly ethnic idiom in a manner that had previously been impossible (although restrictions had gradually loosened over the course of the 1980s).<sup>53</sup> Ethnic activists soon formed what is now known as the Nepal Janajati Adivasi Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, or NEFIN, in English), which was registered in 1990 as an umbrella organization to bring together a range of associations

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<sup>51</sup> These questions, and numerous variations on them, were raised repeatedly in a range of interviews and conversations conducted with Thangmi activists and laypeople. I also heard them expressed in formal speeches at several events. Here in the interest of space I have just summarized the main themes; the point is that the idea of making claims on the state through the idiom of ethnicity was in no way a natural form for Thangmi political consciousness to take, and in fact only arose long after Thangmi had begun making claims through the idiom of class.

<sup>52</sup> It could be suggested that the timing of these transformations was not coincidental, but rather an effect of much larger global discourses of multiculturalism and indigeneity (linked perhaps to neoliberal developmentalist economics), but substantiating such assertions is beyond the scope of my work here.

<sup>53</sup> As Susan Hangen explains, "Suggesting that ethnic inequality existed was considered politically contentious throughout the authoritarian panchayat era (1962–90) and most of the 1990s" (2007: 3).



representing individual ethnic groups.<sup>54</sup> NEFIN played a role in advising the framers of the 1990 Constitution, and for the first time, Nepal was explicitly recognized as a multicultural, multilingual state.

In 1990 in India, the government announced a plan to extend reservations to the Other Backwards Classes (OBCs) as recommended by the 1980 Mandal Commission Report, which had been left unimplemented until a newly sympathetic government came to power (Jenkins 2003: 147). Although the concept of “backward classes” had existed in a vaguely defined form since the colonial era (Galanter 1984: 154–5), the specific groups that fell under this rubric had never been clearly listed, nor had the designation previously carried reservation benefits like those that had been attached to the categories of Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Scheduled Caste (SC) since 1950. Now, up to 52% of India’s population stood to receive some form of state support if they could demonstrate their membership in the category of Other Backwards Classes (Jenkins 2003: 145). Moreover, it seemed that the government was willing to entertain new applications for ST and SC status for the first time in several decades.

These political shifts in Nepal and India had the common effect of powerfully countering class and nation as primary identities by resituating ethnicity as both an essential marker of social difference,

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<sup>54</sup> At its founding, the organization was called simply the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh, or Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN). “Adivasi” and “indigenous” were added only in 2004 (Hangen 2007: 20). The group had eight member organizations at its founding, which had grown to 54 by 2007 (Hangen 2007: 24), and there are several additional groups currently seeking membership (Mukta Tamang, personal communication.)

and a politically salient category through which to make claims on the state.<sup>55</sup> In addition, the changes of 1990 in both countries led to a new preoccupation with ethnic classification—on the part of both the states and the citizens who sought recognition—in order to determine who was a legitimate member of a *janajati* or OBC group. A 1996 task force of His Majesty's Government of Nepal for the "Establishment of the Foundation for the Upliftment of Indigenous Nationalities" defined *janajati* groups as having the following characteristics:

a distinct collective identity; own language, tradition, culture and civilisation; own traditional egalitarian social structure; traditional homeland or geographical area; written or oral history; having 'we-feeling'; has had no decisive role in the politics and government of modern Nepal; who are the indigenous or native peoples of Nepal; and who declares itself as 'janajati' (NFDIN 2003: 6–7)<sup>56</sup>

In determining who qualified as OBC, the Government of India settled on a definition which emphasized social and cultural, as well as economic attributes:

'class' means a homogeneous section of the people grouped together because of certain likenesses or common traits, and who are identifiable by some common attributes such as status, rank, occupation, residence in a locality, race, religion and the like (Supreme Court of India, as cited in Jenkins 2003: 145).

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<sup>55</sup> In Nepal, such claims were made in a primarily oppositional fashion, in the sense that NEFIN was and remains a non-governmental entity pushing the state for increasing commitments to inclusion. In India, these claims were made within the existing framework of the welfare state, since groups did not need to ask the state to institute a system of reservations; rather, they needed to strategically manipulate the existing system in order to gain the best possible situation for themselves.

<sup>56</sup> This definition is particularly interesting for its emphasis on exclusion from politics and governance, as well as on what we might call "self-declaration". Much more can be said about these details, particularly in the current context of calls for ethnic federalism, but that is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

Although the terminology is different, the description of an ideal OBC group shared a great deal with the long-standing definition of “tribe”, as articulated by the 1965 Lokur Committee report: “indication of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and backwardness” (Galanter 1984: 152). The overlap between OBC and ST definitions, particularly in their shared emphasis on the amorphous category of backwardness, later came to bear significantly on the way that Thangmi in India conceptualized their political projects: their first application to the government for special status in 1992 requested recognition as “Other Backwards Class/Scheduled Tribe”, as if there was little difference between the two.

Here, the important point is that this renewed interest in classifying marginalized populations along ethnic lines prompted members of the Thangmi community in both locations to think about how they might organize effectively to align themselves with the emerging ethnic movement in Nepal, and take advantage of the reservation benefits in the offing in India. Prior to 1990, the cross-border Thangmi community as a whole had been influenced by various discourses of social change—from *unnati* to *pragati*—which had compelled Thangmi ethnic identity to be conceptualized as secondary to primary nationalist identities. In India, the pan-Nepali identity that was already in the making when the BLTS came into existence in 1943 had reached its political height in the late 1980s with the violent

movement for the separate state of Gorkhaland.<sup>57</sup> During what is commonly referred to in Darjeeling as “the agitation”, there was no active Thangmi organization, both since public affiliation with any identity other than a ‘Gorkhali’ nationalist one was risky, and because the socio-economic upheaval of the time made other potential movements pragmatically impossible. Similarly in Nepal, the latter half of the 1980s was devoid of Thangmi ethnic organizations, first because the concerns around which they might have formed had been cast as those of a class-based peasant identity within the rhetoric of the communist movement, and later due to the risks associated with any form of public protest in the wake of the Piskar Massacre. In both cases, cultural particularities had been submerged by dominant discourses of resistance that emphasized other aspects of marginalization.

The newly refigured post-1990 political landscapes created space for Thangmi—many of whom had been involved in one way or another in the political projects described above—to consider how the domain of culture might be productively reunited with that of politics within the rapidly emerging paradigms for ethnic activism in both India and Nepal. This is not to say that in the meantime cultural practice had ceased to exist. For many Thangmi in India, it had undergone radical transformation since the era of early migration, as more and more families turned to Hindu pandits or Buddhist lamas for ritual services

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<sup>57</sup> See Subba (1992).

after the dissolution of the BLTS in the mid-1960s, and younger generations ceased speaking the Thangmi language. In Nepal, from the perspective of many politically active Thangmi, culture remained embodied in practice for personal purposes at the level of the community (i.e. politically engaged Thangmi still spoke Thangmi and participated in ritual life dominated by *gurus*), but it was not described in discourse for political purposes at the level of the nation. From the perspective of those who had stayed clear of previous political engagement, such as many older *gurus* and laypeople, particularly women, culture was simply what one did every day—so taken for granted that one could forget it existed (see Chapter 1)—and was best left that way to avoid unwanted attention. All of these perspectives in their own way had previously precluded the instrumentalization of Thangmi culture for expressly *ethnic* political purposes at the level of the nation.<sup>58</sup>

Now, in the early 1990s, the objectification of a particularly Thangmi ethnic culture seemed to hold one of the keys to increased participation in a slowly democratizing Nepali nation that was more willing to entertain ethnic agendas than radical communist ones,<sup>59</sup> as well as to new benefits from an Indian welfare state more amenable to

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<sup>58</sup> The early BLTS cultural performances had been mounted in the service of what we might call welfare, rather than ethno-political, objectives.

<sup>59</sup> The CPN-UML departed from their radical communist roots to join the Nepali Congress in the fight for democracy in 1990. This marked the beginning of their long-term shift towards the political center, a move which seems to have provided a key condition for the later Maoist movement's success, since the latter was able to take advantage of the disillusionment experienced by UML cadres who felt deserted by the party, including many in Piskar (see Shneiderman 2003).

granting reservations to individual ethnic groups with small population numbers than granting a separate state to a more threatening Nepali nationalist bloc. The first step towards developing a cultural narrative that would be recognizable within the terms of either the Nepali or Indian nation was revisiting history to determine what aspects of the disparate, synthetic matrix of Thangmi cultural practice on the ground could be held up as examples of shared “tradition”.<sup>60</sup> The earlier political movements in which Thangmi had taken part had promoted versions of history which had little room for Thangmi or other ethnic particularities. Proponents of both historical materialism in the sense of *pragati*, and proponents of *jati* improvement in the sense of *unnati*, saw society in an evolutionary frame within which ‘backwards’ practices and traditions needed to be reformed, if not entirely discarded, in the process of moving forward towards utopian futures.<sup>61</sup> Now, however, a distinctive history based on those very practices—a history of cultural particularity which highlighted the *differences* between individual groups rather than their commonalities within a grand historical narrative—was a necessary attribute to be considered *janajati* or tribal.

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<sup>60</sup> See Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), Anderson (1991) and Trouillot (1995) for definitive discussions of the role of history in creating contemporary ethno-nationalist identities.

<sup>61</sup> I am grateful to Rhoderick Chalmers for pointing out the similarities between the *unnati* and *pragati* discourses in their treatment of history (personal communication, October 2008).

*Seeking Unitary Histories, Finding Fractured Politics*

Thangmi activists in India were the first to recognize the necessity of a coherent, standardized history as they began the process of compiling their application for OBC status to the state of West Bengal in 1990. Intriguingly, the 1980 Mandal Commission report had listed a group called “Thami” as an OBC in the state of Madhya Pradesh.<sup>62</sup> This realization prompted the Darjeeling-based Thami organization to rename itself the All India Thami Association in an effort to link themselves to the group with the same name in this central Indian state.



Figure 5.5 Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association office in Darjeeling

<sup>62</sup> OBC, ST and SC classification begins at the state level: groups must apply to relevant ministry on a state-by-state basis first, and only after the group in question has received the designation in at least one state can they be considered for the designation at the national level. The different contexts surrounding OBC and ST classification in Sikkim and West Bengal have played an important role in the micro-politics between communities of Nepali heritage in both states, but the details of this issue are beyond the scope of the present discussion.

A delegation of Darjeeling Thangmi traveled to Madhya Pradesh with the objective of finding their long-lost brethren to ask how they had gained OBC status in their state, but as Nathu (who had been part of the delegation) explained, “We did not know where to start, we had no ‘contact’. Maybe the Thami there were entirely different from us, but they had the same name. We tried, but we could not find them”.

Their next strategy was to travel to Nepal, where they hoped to collect information about Thangmi history, culture and language—all required subject headings on the OBC application form—which they felt inadequately equipped to address on their own. The relatively well-educated, middle-class male leaders of the organization in 1992 were all from families that had been settled in Darjeeling for at least two generations, some much longer.<sup>63</sup> Several of them held government jobs, and many had been involved in pan-Nepali political projects. None of them spoke Thangmi, and in interviews they all stated that they had few, if any, recollections of particularly Thangmi cultural practices in their households or communities during their childhood. In short, they were quintessential post-colonial Indian citizens of Nepali heritage, with little sense of a particularly Thangmi identity apart from their name (and the persistent sense of “backwardness” that it carried) and the seasonal presence of migrant Thangmi laborers from Nepal in their town every year—some of whom were their kinsmen.

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<sup>63</sup> Their names are listed on the cover page of the OBC application; I was able to interview four out of the seven association officials from 1992.



It was these laborers to whom they now turned for “contact”, in order to ensure that their first trip to Nepal was not in vain as the journey to Madhya Pradesh had been. Although some members of the Thangmi community in India had maintained relationships with Thangmi from Nepal who appeared in Darjeeling every year, for the most part these were more patron–client than kinship relations, with economically marginal migrant laborers from Nepal requesting temporary places to sleep or donations of food from Thangmi families well–established in India. The latter generally acquiesced, but more out of a sense of pity and obligation than out of familial warmth. According to one circular migrant who had been spending part of every year in Darjeeling since the early 1980s, “Before all of this OBC talk, they never wanted to recognize us. Maybe they threw us scraps or chose to employ us instead of others when they needed a load carried, but otherwise they didn’t want to be reminded that we were also Thangmi.” Or as Rajen, General Secretary of BTWA from 2003–2005 put it more bluntly, “There are two ‘standards’ [of Thangmi]: the ‘low–level’ type and the type with ‘education’. As of yet, we’ve been unable to unify the two.” Joining together to create a coherent ethnic identity with a shared historical narrative across borders, class and educational experience was not at all a natural, or un–selfconscious, process for many of those involved. Rather, it entailed a conscious decision–making process, initiated by Thangmi in India, and later reframed by Thangmi in Nepal for their own purposes as well, to collude in

producing a shared set of historical and cultural objects that were useful to all of them.

When the BTWA Thangmi leadership arrived in Kathmandu on their first official trip (some of them had been for personal reasons before), they used the contacts provided by circular migrants to seek out what they imagined would be a single, coherent Thangmi organization. They were overwhelmed by the proliferation of politically factionalized entities that they instead encountered. By 1991, there were five registered Thangmi organizations in Nepal: Niko Thami Seva Samiti Nepal and Nepal Thami Bhume Sangh in Dolakha; Nepal Pragatisil Thami Samuha in Udayapur; Niko Thami Utthan Manch Nepal in Jhapa; and Niko Thami Sangh Nepal in Ramechhap (NTS organizational profile). Although none of these were official wings of the various mainstream parties they were close to (in the manner that the UML Thami Loktantrik Sangh and the Maoist Thami Mukti Morcha would be a decade later), the political fault lines between them were clear. Dolakha had one UML-leaning organization (Niko Thami Seva Samiti Nepal) and one Nepali Congress-leaning organization (Nepal Thami Bhume Sangh). Udayapur's single organization was staunchly communist, in fact much farther left than the UML party line, while Jhapa's organization was Congress-affiliated, and Ramechhap's was again aligned with the UML. Overall, three out of the five were leftist organizations which espoused varying degrees of communist ideology, while two leaned towards the center-right. None of the

leaders deigned to speak with one another, and those who broadly shared the communist label were even less interested in collaborating with their ideologically close counterparts than they were in talking with those in the Congress camp.<sup>64</sup> All of this meant that the prospects for creating a unified Thangmi *ethnic* movement—which could overcome the political differences in which potential activists were already deeply invested—were challenging at best.

Most of the BTWA activists in leadership positions in the early 1990s had steered clear of explicit political affiliation during the Gorkhaland agitation, instead focusing on their government jobs and informal social welfare style activities. For Thangmi from India, the passionate maintenance of political boundaries in which Thangmi activists in Nepal engaged was bewildering. So was the geographical dispersion of Thangmi organizations in Nepal, since none of the organizations were nationally registered in Kathmandu, rather only at the district level. In their pamphlets and publications, all of these organizations portrayed their localized set of concerns as those affecting all Thangmi, yet none of these groups had members from beyond the district where they were registered. Their priorities, as reflected in their names, varied from *seva* (social service) to *bhume* (earth; in this case a reference to Thangmi territory) to *utthan* (upliftment) and *pragati* (progress). Although each claimed authority to

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<sup>64</sup> This reflects a broader pattern in Nepali politics, in which parties who are ideologically closer to each other (i.e. UML and Maoist) are unable to overcome the small differences and personal power politics between them to collaborate effectively.

speak for all Thangmi, none of them had mobilized that voice at the national level. Moreover, in this transitional period in the immediate wake of the return to democracy in Nepal when ethnic organizations were finding their feet, culture and history of the sort that Thangmi in India were seeking—those objectifiable as sacred—were still in the early phases of articulation in Nepal, remaining heavily in the shadow of class.

Niko Thami Seva Samiti (NTSS), the organization most closely aligned with the first incarnation of NEFEN, put out a two page “appeal” in September 1990, which appears to be the first post-Jana Andolan publication by a Thangmi organization.<sup>65</sup> I found copies of the thin paper document filed in the BTWA archives, along with other draft materials that eventually made their way into the West Bengal OBC application—hand-written notes for a Thangmi glossary, descriptions of a “birth ceremony” and “Bhume puja”—suggesting that the BTWA activists picked it up on their information gathering trip to Nepal.<sup>66</sup> The ‘appeal’ invokes the discourses of *vikas* (development) and *adhikar* (rights) to suggest that:

it is important that we Thamis unite in order to access our rights, to preserve our culture, language, social values and good traditions and to develop in every sector, including the political, financial, religious and cultural.

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<sup>65</sup> This organization began its operations in Dolakha, registering a branch in Kathmandu in 1995—the first Thangmi organization to be registered in the capital.

<sup>66</sup> The document was also on file at the NTS office in Kathmandu, and several individuals referred to it when describing the first wave of post-1990 organizing in Nepal.

However, the pamphlet places the blame for the fragmented nature of the Thangmi world (social, cultural, political) squarely on the shoulders of “feudalists”, and the hopes for future Thangmi unity are placed in class solidarity, not shared cultural practice:

We should clearly understand the feudal practice that is creating various illusions about us Thami people. If we don't uproot the feudal system, which has been involved in the practice of injustice and atrocities against us, it will once again succeed in creating various illusions and keeping us under its control...We must take caution, and until and unless the feudal system is completely uprooted from our society, feudal practices which split and exploit us in order to rule the country will continue to exist.... as soon as they hear that we are organised, feudalists will become restless ... Then they will panic and try to fragment our organisation.

The appeal then picks up the discourse of domestication that had been introduced by communist cadres like Bohara and Shakya (as described above), suggesting that Thangmi must shed the “wild” (N: *jangali*) image that the nation holds of them in order to become modern citizens of Nepal. This task is to be achieved by giving up wild crafts, clothing and foods, a theme echoed in the poem that serves as this chapter's second epigraph, in which “hunting in the forests for underground fruits” is dualistically opposed to “using Thami hands for development”.

The appeal concludes with a 13-point set of demands, the final and most substantive of which is a call for reservations, Indian style: “Depending on their eligibility, unconditional places should be reserved for the backward Thamis in civil service, army, police,

teaching and in any other government institution". The Indian government had indicated their intention to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report only a month before the NTSS appeal was issued; but as Nathu explained, he and several other Thangmi had been postering the Darjeeling bazaar with an appeal for OBC status since 1987 (against the wishes of several Thangmi involved with the Gorkhaland movement at the time). Such posters would have made this a visible issue for several years preceding 1990, and apparently news traveled fast through the cross-border Thangmi community once the prospect for getting recognized as OBC became more realistic. As Gopal, one of the primary authors of the appeal, explained, "We heard what was going on in India, and we thought it was also time to demand the same facilities here. After all, we are all Thangmi, why should they get something different from us?"<sup>67</sup> The BTWA leadership only made its first visit to Nepal several months later, and it would be several years still until Thangmi activists in Nepal could put aside their political and personal differences to create a united organization which recognized culture as a political resource to be cultivated, rather than as a hindrance to development best discarded.

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<sup>67</sup> The appeal also states, "the feudal regime ... forced us to go to *mugalan* (India)". Here it sounds as if migrating to India is an entirely negative experience, which in an ideal world of class equality would not be necessary; yet at the same time Gopal clearly saw the benefits that Thangmi could avail themselves of in India as a positive result of settling there. See Hutt (1998) for a discussion of the term *mugalan*.

*OBC*: na jat, na bhat

In the meantime, the “Thami” were officially gazzetted as an OBC group in West Bengal in 1995. The process had been exhausting for those most intimately involved, with an in-depth correspondence between the then-BTWA secretary, Basant, and both the state and central governments, and several trips to Calcutta and Delhi just to ensure that the application had reached the correct offices.<sup>68</sup> In addition, the BTWA was required to defend the statements it had made on the application in front of a commission which visited Darjeeling in early 1995, a task which caused the leadership some consternation. In the application they had made several normative statements (“It is well established fact with positive proof that ...”) about the nature of Thangmi culture, history and society, which the BTWA leadership themselves could not substantiate. For instance, they had described the Thangmi as “poor and illiterate”, “daily wage labourers”, while they themselves were all relatively well-off, well-educated civil servants. Under “religion”, the Thangmi were said to “worship Bhume, who is the personification of the land”, with their own “primitive shaman culture”, but most of the BTWA leadership had grown up in a predominantly Hindu ritual sphere.<sup>69</sup> Under the heading of “dialect”, Thangmi were said to have “their own tribal language or dialect”, which none of the

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<sup>68</sup> See Middleton and Shneiderman (2008) for additional details of the administrative machinery through which such applications are processed.

<sup>69</sup> Intriguingly, this section makes comparisons to both Kiranti culture “similar to Rais” and pre-Buddhist Tibetan traditions “Bonbo-culture of Tibet”, both allusions worth discussing in further detail elsewhere.

BTWA leadership spoke. In short, instead of describing themselves, the authors of the application had described the Thangmi from Nepal whom they had encountered as wage laborers in Darjeeling.

When it came time to defend their application in front of the state commission, the BTWA leadership had to look both to the upper echelons of the Thangmi community for individuals who spoke the best English and Bengali in order to communicate with the state officials, and to the lower rungs in order to find those who spoke Thangmi fluently (the BTWA officers themselves were most comfortable in Nepali). “We had to go all together, with both the most educated and the porters”, explained Nathu.<sup>70</sup> Paras, the BTWA president, represented the “educated” (*padhai-lekhai*, as discussed in Chapter 3), and several wage laborers were hired for the day to stand by to answer questions about culture and language. By virtue of their incomplete citizen status, these individuals were not included in the population statistics included in the OBC application (which showed 4288 Thangmi throughout West Bengal), and would not stand to benefit directly from any special status that might be attained.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Nathu was perhaps the BTWA leader who was best able to negotiate between these two worlds, for reasons that will be described in more detail below. Although he shared the born-and-bred in Darjeeling background of the other leaders, his family had stayed in relatively close contact with kin in Nepal, and Nathu made a conscientious effort to treat migrant laborers like family in a manner that differed from the others’ attitude of derision. He was ousted from BTWA leadership soon after OBC status was attained, in large part because his identification with migrant labor was perceived to challenge the Thangmi claim to indigeneity.

<sup>71</sup> Although some of these circular migrants probably had some of the trappings of Indian citizenship, as described in Chapter 4, the official BTWA membership list included only those whose fathers or grandfathers were already citizens as of 1950 so as to avoid charges of being a non-Indian population of migrants from Nepal. This



At the same time that they had asserted “positive proof” of a distinctive culture, in other parts of the application its authors betrayed their ambivalence about the entire undertaking by stating repeatedly that they they had none (or perhaps they were just echoing the refusal to objectify cultural practice that they, like me, had received when they first posed the question “What is Thangmi culture?” to Thangmi gurus in Nepal). For instance, the application included the statements: “‘THAMI’ community have no distinct religion of their own”, and, “THAMI has got no particular festival of their own”, as well as two paragraphs that attempted to explain why many Thangmi could no longer speak their own language. At least the authors of the application were being honest when they described their “dress” as “nothing special”, stated that their forebears had migrated from Tibet, Burma and Nepal (although they fixed the dates of migration between 1815–1835),<sup>72</sup> and acknowledged that they observed Hindu festivals in addition to their own shamanic ones. It was these statements, which in fact described Thangmi in India most accurately, that the BTWA later felt they needed to do away with in order to climb the ladder to the pinnacle of ST status.

But why was their hard-won OBC status inadequate? Why did the BTWA decide to take their quest for recognition a step further by demanding ST status less than ten years after receiving recognition as

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meant that only “established” Indian Thangmi families known to the BTWA leadership were included.

<sup>72</sup> A small number of Thangmi families had settled first in Burma after leaving Nepal, making their way to India only much later.

an OBC? The first part of the answer is that, as described above, neither the BTWA leadership nor lay Thangmi in India had understood the nuanced differences in benefits between OBC and ST at the time they made their first application. In their minds, any recognition from the state as a marginalized group worthy of assistance would be an accomplishment. But after the OBC label had been applied to them, disillusionment quickly set in. It turned out that OBC status only qualified a group for reservations in state and central government jobs and education, but not the direct economic subsidies and territorial provisions that ST status afforded.

By the time I first visited Darjeeling in 2000, the phrase *na jat na bhat* (N: neither caste nor rice) was already a popular complaint about the OBC designation: it was perceived to carry neither the social authority nor the economic benefits of SC or ST status. Moreover, so many other groups had been officially recognized as OBC at around the same time as the Thangmi that the value of the category was perceived to have diminished, since it no longer set those who held it apart from others. This was especially the case in Darjeeling, where nearly all of the groups of Nepali heritage were now in the same category, with the exception of Bahun and Chhetri.<sup>73</sup>

Another part of the problem was the administrative complexity of actually getting certified as an individual member of an OBC group.

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<sup>73</sup> Eight other groups of Nepali heritage were listed alongside the Thangmi in the 1995 gazette: Bhujel, Newar, Mangar (known as Magar in Nepal), Nembang, Sampang, Bunggheng, Jogi and Dhimal.

First one had to submit a personal application to the District Magistrate's office, including a recommendation letter from the registered representative body of the ethnic group in question, along with letters from two paternal relatives from the same ethnic group. These two provisions proved complicated for many. The first requirement was challenging for those who were not politically involved with the organization already, and who might be at odds with its leadership for a range of personal or political reasons (including many of the more recently migrated, less well-off families). The second requirement proved challenging for those who might trace their membership in the group through their mother, and so could not provide the necessary letters.<sup>74</sup> Then, each applicant had to appear in person at a hearing and answer a range of often invasive questions. The upshot was that as of 2004, by which time the Thangmi had held OBC status for almost a decade, only about 160 individuals had actually received their certificates within Darjeeling municipality.<sup>75</sup> These individual administrative hurdles were the same for groups holding ST status, yet somehow the grass seemed greener on the other side. In addition, two of the most prominent groups, the Tamang and Limbu, had already moved on to demand ST status, and Thangmi feared that if groups with such comparatively large populations

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<sup>74</sup> These issues are worthy of substantial discussion, which I hope to take up in a future article on kinship, gender, and Indian policies of recognition.

<sup>75</sup> This figure was provided to me by a municipality secretary who collated records from every year since 1995 for me. It only includes those resident within Darjeeling municipality, not Thangmi in other areas of the district.

received that designation, they themselves would no longer have any hope of competing for civil service and educational positions. OBC began to seem like a stepping stone on the way to ST status—an important intermediate point along the way, but by no means the destination itself.

The primary differences between the definition of a Scheduled Tribe and a Backwards Class are in the requirements of “primitive traits” and “geographical isolation” for the former. In Darjeeling layman’s terms, these two criteria for the tribal designation were interpreted to mean “non-Hindu” and “indigenous” respectively. Whether the Government of India actually intended them to be read in this way is a subject of great debate, but many Thangmi activists interpreted these terms to mean that any Hindu-inflected aspect of religious or cultural practice, or any mention of migration from outside of India, would provide grounds for disqualification. If they were to be taken seriously as legitimate aspirants to the ST title, a much more rigorously bounded notion of Thangmi culture and history would be necessary than that contained in either the OBC application’s paradoxical statements, or the state-supported developmentalist discourse of 1990s Nepal that sought to mold “primitive” practices into modern (i.e. Hinduized) models.

*Unifying as an Ethnic Group: the Nepal Thami Samaj*

In 1999, the Nepal Thami Samaj (NTS) was formed with the intention of unifying the existing array of Thangmi organizations in Nepal under a central, apolitical aegis registered in Kathmandu to work under the umbrella of what was then NEFEN to advance *janajati* activist agendas at the national level. The organization's first objective, as stated in its constitution, was to overcome the politicized past of Thangmi activism: "NTS shall not be operated through directive principles of any political party, but it shall be a common social organisation for all the Thamis across the nation" (NTS 2000 constitution, article 2.5.a). Although the organization was to be registered in Nepal to agitate for Thangmi concerns vis-à-vis the Nepali state, the authors of its constitution articulated an explicitly transnational vision of what constituted membership in the "Thangmi society", broadly conceived, from which this particular organization took its name: "'Thami Society' refers to all the Thamis attached to the cultural, social and religious norms and values of the Thamis from inside or outside of Nepal, who can or cannot speak the Thami language" (NTS 2000 constitution, article 1.2.b).

The careful statement that even those from "outside Nepal" who might not speak the language could belong was clearly designed to include the Thangmi from India with whom Thangmi activists in Nepal had come into increasing contact over the past several years. Despite the fact that the linguistic incompetence and cultural differences of

Thangmi in India prompted many lay Thangmi in Nepal to dismiss the claims of the former to belong to “Thangmi society”, the NTS leadership was impressed by their organizational abilities and their political success in gaining OBC status, and thought the BTWA leadership might have something to contribute as NTS began to consider their options for recognition in Nepal. Thangmi in India were certainly “attached” to cultural, social and religious norms, albeit in different ways than most Thangmi in Nepal were. Yet despite the broadly inclusive statement of who belonged to “Thangmi society”, membership of the organization was in fact restricted to, “Any Nepali Thami citizen who has completed 16 years of age” (NTS 2000 constitution 3.9.a). As one member of the committee involved in drafting the constitution explained, “We wanted to learn from them [Thangmi from India] but we did not want them to ‘dominate’ us as the educated have for so long done to villagers”.<sup>76</sup> So a compromise had been struck: Thangmi from India could be involved in the organization in an advisory capacity, but only those who held Nepali citizenship could be voting members. In reality, this created a substantial loophole, since as described in Chapter 4, many Thangmi who were Indian citizens of Nepali heritage did in fact hold Nepali citizenship papers as well. This would have substantial implications for the organization’s direction just a few years down the line.

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<sup>76</sup> Some informants framed this even more bluntly in terms of a tit-for-tat with the BTWA for excluding from their census migrant laborers who could not demonstrate their families had been settled since before 1950.

Members of the Jhapa branch of the Thangmi community were once again instrumental in envisioning this new Thangmi organization, just as they had been during the first wave of Thangmi association formation in the 1970s and 80s. In particular, a young man named Megh Raj had taken the initiative to call for the unification of the Thangmi associations under the single heading of NTS. Since the mid-1990s, he had been running an organization based in Jhapa called the Thami Bhasa Tatha Sanskriti Utthan Kendra (TBTSUK)—the Thami Language and Cultural Upliftment Center.<sup>77</sup> Its goal was *utthan*, but here the concept of upliftment was deployed in a novel way, referring to the objects of Thangmi language and culture themselves, not the destitute masses of rural Thangmi.

In Megh Raj's view, as articulated throughout the 1999 publication *Dolakhareng*, Thangmi villagers in rural areas had allowed their vast cultural resources to degenerate due to their lack of education, and it was the responsibility of educated Thangmi, hopefully with the support of the Nepali state, to retrieve these valuable objects from their incompetent guardians: "No one can deny the fact that the historical facts kept so far in the possession of this ethnic group might be lost forever unless serious concern is shown ..." (Reng 1999: 4). Such concern was vital to the Thangmi community's potential to organize around the unifying discourse of ethnicity, since

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<sup>77</sup> The organization was formally registered as Niko Thami Utthan Manch Nepal, but on all of its published materials the name Thami Bhasa Tatha Sanskriti Utthan Kendra appears instead; based on Megh Raj's preferences I have used the latter here.

creating an ethnic identity recognizable at the national level would require clearly objectified notions of culture and history. In reaching these conclusions, Megh Raj was heavily influenced by the BTWA campaigns for OBC and then ST status—his own parents had returned to settle in Jhapa after growing up in Darjeeling, and for him Darjeeling was the closest cultural center, not Kathmandu. Having completed his BA degree, he was also educationally and economically closer to the BTWA leadership than most of the NTS activists who had grown up in the villages of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok and who rarely possessed any secondary education. Megh Raj sought to use his intermediate position as a Jhapa Thangmi to bring the two activist groups closer together.

Megh Raj acknowledged that the inability to instrumentalize culture for productive political purposes up until this time was not entirely the fault of rural Thangmi themselves, for:

There may be quite a few reasons for their backwardness and they include: lack of education, poverty, wild attitude, orthodox traditions, following die-hard conservatism, outdated mentality, lack of self-motivation, disorganised society, decentralisation on the basis of profession, impenetrable geographic condition, lack of contact with outsiders, unawareness, unscientific method of performance, internal strife, prodigal custom, local exploitation, oppression, torture and lack of government policy based on the amelioration of the condition of people. Such deterioration may not only destroy the national identity of Thamis but also their physical existence. It has become imperative for all conscious people of the country to do their best for the overall development of this ethnic group and for Thamis themselves to be self-motivated towards it. (Reng 1999: 23).



There was no time to waste in working towards incremental economic development in the hope that these “backwards” yet “original” Thangmi would come to consciousness in a manner conducive to forwarding the political goals that Megh Raj envisioned. Instead, it was the responsibility of already “conscious” Thangmi like himself to rescue their shared cultural history in order to create the basis for an ethnic movement within Nepal that might have any hopes of achieving what its Indian counterpart had. Some of the ways in which Megh Raj hoped to do this was through the creation of ‘culture heroes’ in the form of the Thangmi ancestors Ya’apa and Sunari Ama (whose story is described in detail in Chapter 6), creation of a Thangmi alphabet, and standardization of ritual practice in singular written forms. His vision of Thangmi culture, history and language as objects to be valorized for their very primitiveness, and reappropriated by an educated ethnic leadership, was quite different from the desire for modernity through developmentalist transformation expressed in the 1990 NTSS appeal described above, and owed much more to the Indian discourse of reservations on the basis of distinctive socio-cultural features, than to the discourses of socialism and development in Nepal on which Thangmi activists from Dolakha and Sindhupalchok had cut their teeth.

It was with these goals in mind that Megh Raj worked to bring the leadership of the five extant Thangmi organizations together for a national convention in 1999, the result of which was NTS, whose constitution was finalized in 2000. The new organization’s logo was

adapted from the one already in use by Megh Raj's TBTSUK, which appeared on the cover of *Dolakhareng* (see Figure 5.6). It combined several elements that referenced Thangmi ritual and cultural practice, as well as their claim to autochthony in the shadow of the Gaurishankar massif that dominates Dolakha's skyline. As the NTS constitution states:

The organisation's logo shall contain the following components: a guru's drum... a portion of the earth, with a two-leaf nettle plant on it; a *baldaneko kosa* [T: flower used in Thangmi rituals] on both sides, crossing each other at a common base; in the foothills of the Gaurishankar Himal, a flute and a *madal* at the centre, resting on a bow-string. On top of the drum's are two *gaja* [N: steeple found on top of Hindu temples]; between the *gaja* and the drum are three-leaf *titepati* plants [N: wormwood leaf, used as incense in Thangmi rituals]. The two open ends of the *gaja* are hanging from the side of the drum, underneath which is a yellow flag, carrying the organisation's name, and the figures "2056" written on the yellow flag at the top.

For the first time, a Thangmi ethnic association in Nepal was representing itself with ritual objects extracted from their practice context and objectified as evidence of a distinctively Thangmi ethnic identity. However, true to Thangmi form, it was really only the combination of them in this particular constellation which might be seen as particularly Thangmi, since all of the individual elements were also used by other ethnic groups in Nepal, as well as other groups of Nepali heritage in India.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> See Chapter 2 for a related discussion of the BTWA's logo.



Figure 5.6 Nepal Thami Samaj logo

*Class and Social Welfare Die Hard: Dissent in Nepal and India*

NTS had taken up the call of ethnic politics just as Nepal's Maoist movement was beginning to gain ground. I have discussed the dynamics of the insurgency in the Thangmi area of Nepal at length elsewhere, so I will not repeat those details.<sup>79</sup> My point here is that the prospects for NTS to emerge as a unified political front that felt genuinely inclusive to all Thangmi were already weak, given the factionalized histories and economic and educational disparities within the community, and the emergence of a violent far-left movement provided yet another obstacle. The Maoist version of the long-familiar trope of class warfare was more attractive to many Thangmi who remained subsistence farmers in rural villages than the culturally-based vision of ethnic politics promoted by Megh Raj and his supporters in NTS.<sup>80</sup> Some rural Thangmi who held communist visions of forward progress accused the NTS leadership of being bourgeois intellectuals who sought to steal the cultural possessions of impoverished Thangmi to gain stature for themselves: "They're seeking to make themselves big on the basis of our name, language and traditions, but they don't care about our poverty",<sup>81</sup> was a common

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<sup>79</sup> See Shneiderman (2003) and Shneiderman and Turin (2004).

<sup>80</sup> An additional effect of the conflict was for circular migrants to spend longer periods of time in Darjeeling, just at the time that ST politics were accelerating, thereby circulating more information about this agenda back to Nepal.

<sup>81</sup> Original Nepali: *Hamro nam, bhasa, riti-riwaj chalaera yiniharule aphulai thulo huna khojchha, tara hami garib harulai wasta gardainan.*

complaint about the NTS leadership heard throughout Dolakha and Sindhupalchok in the early 2000s.<sup>82</sup>

As described in Chapters 2 and 3, it was particularly rare to find guru or others deeply involved in ritual practice who felt comfortable with what they perceived as the activist appropriation of such practice for political purposes. This was made patently clear during a 2001 NTS conference held at Bhume Jatra in Dolakha, during which activists invited gurus from across the Thangmi world were called to recite their *paloke*.<sup>83</sup> The NTS leadership were intent on recording and transcribing each guru's version with an eye towards standardizing them, but they met with two forms of resistance. First, the guru did not see the point of such standardization, preferring to locate power in orality itself. Second, they were wary of efforts to represent Thangmi religion as part of a broader "Kirant *dharma*". This agenda was motivated by both the then-ongoing 2001 census, which listed "Kirant *dharma*" as a potential category of identification for the first time, as well as the desires of Thangmi in India to disassociate themselves from Hindu-inflected ritual practices due to the perceived prerogatives of ST classification. As one young Thangmi who served as a guru's assistant and was himself resistant to NTS's strategies recounted:

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<sup>82</sup> A small but influential number of Thangmi cast their lot with the Maoist People's Liberation Army, and the first Thangmi member of national government is a Maoist Constituent Assembly member, Chun Bahadur, elected from Dolakha in April 2008.

<sup>83</sup> See Chapter 3 for a description of the power dynamic between gurus and activists, and Chapter 6 for further details of this particular Bhume Jatra event.

At the Suspa conference, those from Jhapa made an appeal to follow the Kirant dharma, and to learn and receive training from the Kirats. The senior gurus rejected this, saying, “Why do we have to join with them, we have our own religion: Bhume *dharma*. We should continue to practice this.

This sense of disjuncture between culture and religion as practiced in Thangmi villages, and their objectification as expedient political objects by those based in Kathmandu, Jhapa, and Darjeeling, was exacerbated by the 2002 election of Khumbalal, a relative of Megh Raj’s, as NTS chairman. Born and educated in Darjeeling, he had settled in Kathmandu to start a restaurant business, the success of which had enabled him to build a large house on the outskirts of the city by 2002, when he was in his early 50s. Megh Raj hoped that Khumbalal’s age and economic stature would lend an aura of authority to NTS’s agenda, since he was aware of the organization’s unpopularity in certain quarters. The first project under Khumbalal’s tenure was to produce a new publication, for which Khumbalal served as editor, funded by the new National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN), which had been established in the same year.

The book entitled *Thami Samudayako Aitihāsik Chinari ra Sanskar Sanskriti — The Thami Community’s Historic Symbols and Ritual Culture*—claimed to be an improvement on all of the Thangmi publications which had preceded it, since those were based only on, “little truth and big imagination” rather than “historical fact” as this

publication claimed to be (Samudaya 2061 [2056]: 3).<sup>84</sup> The primary intended audience of this publication appeared to be not the Thangmi public of rural Nepal, but rather the Thangmi public of urban Darjeeling and Sikkim, and through them the Indian state, to which the BTWA was preparing to submit their application for tribal status. In the book's opening lines, the editor addressed the, "brothers and sisters who have been living far from their own ancestors and fighting for identity", suggesting that, "although we are living apart geographically, we have common thought and blood flowing in our veins" (Samudaya 2061 [2056]: 3).

I first saw this publication in Darjeeling, where several hundred copies had been sent before they were distributed widely in Kathmandu or Thangmi villages in Nepal. Once news reached Dolakha and Sindhupalchok that the publication had been delivered in India before it had been sent to Thangmi villages in Nepal, the district-level members of the NTS could not contain their outrage. One of them told me:

That Khumbalal is just an Indian *chamcha* [N: spoon, idiomatic expression meaning sycophant], he is spending all of the money contributed by NFDIN in *our* name to write a big book that spreads lies about us so that his relatives in India *mithai khanna paunchha* [N: get to eat sweets, referring to the rewards of prospective ST benefits]. And here we still don't have even basic facilities – that money should be going to our development instead.

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<sup>84</sup> Although the book's imprint shows that it was published in 2056 VS, it was actually only printed and distributed in 2061 VS.

For such Thangmi in Nepal who had rallied to the call for a unified ethnic association, the primary motivation for participating in this sort of ethnic politics was the promise of securing better basic living standards—“welfare”, in the most fundamental sense—but in their view, such objectives were being hijacked by cultural politics in an unsatisfactory manner.

This divide between those who wanted the Thangmi ethnic associations to focus on basic welfare within the community and those who wanted it to engage in cultural politics in order to make claims on the state(s) did not map neatly onto the national borders of Nepal and India, but had more to do with educational and economic status, generation, and the particularities of personal outlook. Some of the NTS activists working most closely with Khumbalal and Megh Raj at the central level were young Thangmi originally from villages in Dolakha and Sindhupalchok, who were relatively highly educated (having passed SLC and in some cases attained an IA or BA degree), and sought to distance themselves from their roots by taking up the call to cultural politics. At the same time, some of the older BTWA activists embarked upon their own transnational social welfare projects in order to register their dissent from the direction the BTWA had taken, while simultaneously revisiting their roots in a different manner.

For instance, in the late 1990s, Nathu’s family began an initiative to raise funds from Darjeeling Thangmi to support a primary school in the Dolakha village of Alampu. The idea was proposed by Nathu’s



brother-in-law, who had migrated to Darjeeling from Alampu as a teenager himself. As participants in this project explained, they wanted to use their comparatively high levels of education and economic status—which they saw as the lucky product of their forebears’ decision to settle in India, rather than as evidence of their superiority or fundamental difference—to improve the welfare of their Thangmi brethren in Nepal. The focus of their visits to Nepal were very different to the culture-seeking journeys of the BTWA leadership. Back in Darjeeling, the two groups came into conflict over a range of issues, but the tension focused on their different attitudes towards acknowledging their own history of migration—the former by maintaining and in fact expanding existing ties with Thangmi in Nepal, the latter disavowing their direct links with the people, while appropriating their culture and language as sacred objects within their own form of associationally-based ritual activity. This dispute eventually led to Nathu’s dismissal from BTWA membership. Other BTWA members would soon experience similar exclusion for their unwillingness to give up Hindu-influenced cultural practices or adhere to new versions of Thangmi history that did not acknowledge migration from Nepal. This is what Nathu meant when he contrasted the agenda of “social welfare” with that of “making history”.

### *Militant Mouse Eaters*

Two seminal events occurred for the BTWA in 2003. At the beginning of the year, the Tamang and Limbu were granted ST status in Sikkim, and soon thereafter at the national level. At the end of the year, Basant, the General Secretary who had been largely responsible for shepherding the OBC application through, died suddenly at the age of 38 from an apparent stroke or aneurysm. The first event raised the Thangmi desire for ST status to a feverish pitch, while the second event made it much less clear how they would go about achieving it. Basant was a municipal official with intellectual interests who read widely and had compiled a substantial dossier of published materials about the Thangmi (much of which was reproduced in the 2003 *Niko Bachinte* publication of which he was general editor), and the combination of his knowledge about the Indian administrative system and his insatiable appetite for learning about things Thangmi was a powerful force without which the organization was at a loss.<sup>85</sup>

Into the void stepped Rajen, a young BTWA member whom up until this time had been best known for his seemingly academic interest in compiling a Thangmi dictionary, based on words collected by informants throughout Darjeeling bazaar from both settled and seasonal migrant Thangmi.<sup>86</sup> It became clear that beneath Rajen's thick

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<sup>85</sup> He was replaced on the BTWA executive board, as well as in his government job, by his widow, Kala, who turned out to be an excellent administrator, but did not share her late husband's charisma or knowledge of cultural issues.

<sup>86</sup> Two other Thangmi dictionaries appeared in Nepal at roughly the same time. One was published by Gopal Thami of Suspa, Dolakha, while the other was published by Mark Turin with Bir Bahadur Thami (2004).

glasses and lengthy word lists lived a militant ethnic activist, whose offer to fill Basant's shoes as BTWA General Secretary carried with it an agenda of historical revisionism and cultural manipulation of an intensity that the organization had not yet experienced. In order to meet the perceived criteria of "primitive traits" for ST status,<sup>87</sup> Rajen initiated several campaigns to manipulate the day-to-day cultural practice of Thangmi in India in order to demonstrate these qualities.<sup>88</sup>

One of the most extreme examples of this dynamic emerged in the form of a debate about consuming mouse meat (T: *uyuko cici*; N: *musako masu*).<sup>89</sup> Rajen remembered an apocryphal tale told by his grandparents, which held that Thangmi used to eat mouse meat as a staple food in Nepal. Although Thangmi in Nepal may have occasionally eaten mouse meat, any consumption of it was due to poverty (and is a desperate measure taken by members of other ethnic groups as well in hill Nepal), rather than because eating mouse is a marker of Thangmi cultural identity.<sup>90</sup> Any Thangmi family who has other food sources stays conspicuously away from mouse meat, while many Thangmi in Nepal continue to eat beef, a consumption practice that is undoubtedly an act of resistance within the until recently

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<sup>87</sup> In BTWA publications, posters and invitations to events, this is usually glossed as *anautho chalan* in Nepali. The literal translation of this is "unusual" or "extraordinary" "traditions" in the folkloric sense.

<sup>88</sup> Rajen's attempts to demonstrate indigeneity in India are discussed in Chapter 6.

<sup>89</sup> Literally this should be translated as "rodent meat", since it can include all types of rats and mice, but for simplicity and to match the BTWA's English term of choice I have chosen to stick with "mouse meat".

<sup>90</sup> I have seen it cooked only once in my ten years of experience in Thangmi villages.

officially Hindu nation–state of Nepal.<sup>91</sup> Thangmi have no problem maintaining unpopular consumption practices if they choose to: eating mouse meat is not an identity marker, whereas eating beef is an expression of an alternative, non–Hindu identity. Despite all this, Rajen began a crusade to convince Darjeeling Thangmi to “return” to eating mouse meat as a means of expressing their tribal identity. Moreover, having a distinctive food item—which Thangmi in India did not otherwise have, in large part because beef–eating is not taboo in Darjeeling, preventing it from being the distinctive marker it is in Nepal—would allow the group to participate in an annual government–sponsored ethnic food festival, giving them an opportunity demonstrate their primitive traits in a high–profile forum.

The directive to begin eating mouse meat angered many in India, both from settled families and the migrant population from Nepal, but for different reasons. The former group could not see the point of doing something they had never done before in the name of “culture”, particularly since nowhere did the Government of India clearly state that having a distinctive or primitive cuisine was a necessary prerequisite to being listed as a Scheduled Tribe. The latter group, who might have eaten mouse or other undesirable foods back in their home villages during periods of food scarcity, found the idea insulting because it reminded them of the abject poverty they had left behind

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<sup>91</sup> See Ogura (2007: 452, 473) for a related discussion of beef–eating among the Kham Magar, a practice appropriated by the Maoists.

and undercut the upward economic and social mobility to which they aspired in Darjeeling.

In addition, Rajen sent a circular to the entire BTWA membership stating that Hindu practices were to be discontinued, and that anyone who did not comply risked expulsion from the organization. The implication was that members of the organization would lose their prospect of getting an individual ST certificate when the time came, since they would not be able to get the necessary recommendation letter from the organization. He received several letters in response from individuals who stated that they did not agree with this agenda, and would risk losing their membership. One was from the Tumsong tea plantation family, who had up until this time been one of the primary financial contributors to the organization, and they now explicitly canceled their support on the basis that they had long taken pride in their employment of a Hindu *pandit*, whose life contract they were not about to terminate now.<sup>92</sup> The BTWA, like the NTS, was now confronted with serious dissent from within its membership on a range of issues. In order to recapture the semblance of ethnic unity necessary to maintain a functioning ethnic organization on both sides of the border, a change of leadership and focus was necessary.

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<sup>92</sup> They had in fact supported several generations of the same Bahun family from a village in eastern Nepal, the incumbent of which continued to live in their compound during my fieldwork.

### *Turning Towards Development*

In 2004, Khumbalal was ousted from the leadership of the NTS, and replaced by Bhaba Bahadur, a young man in his twenties from the village of Suspa who had received a scholarship to study at Buddhanilkantha, one of Nepal's premier English medium schools. He brought together in a single person the attributes of both a village Thangmi who spoke his own language, maintained Thangmi ritual practices, and had been skeptical of earlier NTS agendas, and those of a *buddhijibi*, or highly educated "intellectual". In Darjeeling, Rajen stepped down and this time the executive committee decided to work as a group, rather than electing a General Secretary, in the interest of maintaining a diverse set of opinions at the central level.<sup>93</sup>

In part due to Bhaba's own interest in pursuing a basic development agenda, and in part due to broader trends in Nepal that brought international development dollars to ethnic organizations, the NTS departed from Khumbalal's cultural politics to adopt what they called a "livelihood-based development strategy" as a primary goal.<sup>94</sup> In 2004, NEFIN received a grant of 1.52 million pounds sterling from

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<sup>93</sup> Some members of the Darjeeling Thangmi community claim that the reason no one was elected was because the executive committee was unable to call a General Meeting due to financial irregularities. However, the executive committee members told me that they had been dissatisfied with what many perceived as Rajen's militant leadership style, and that by maintaining leadership as a group instead of vesting it in one individual they were more likely to have a balanced and well-functioning organization.

<sup>94</sup> At around the same time, NFDIN changed its name in Nepali from Adivasi Janajati Utthan Kendra to Adivasi Janajati Vikas Pratisthan, signaling a broader shift from the ideals of "upliftment" (*utthan*) to those of "development" (*vikas*) at the level of national ethnic discourse.

the Enabling State Program of the British government's Department for Foreign Development (DFiD) to set up the new Janajati Empowerment Project (JEP). As the representative body of one of the 24 of its 59 member groups that NEFIN had classified as "highly marginalized *janajati*",<sup>95</sup> NTS received several hundred thousand rupees through the JEP to set up the similarly named Thami Empowerment Project (TEP), the objectives of which were collecting baseline information about Thangmi livelihoods and implementing district-level projects for their improvement. The project leader of TEP was none other than Megh Raj, who was later accused of using a bait and switch approach to entice rural Thangmi into participation with the promise of economic development, which quickly transformed into the familiar but less desirable (to rural Thangmi) discourse of rights to be achieved through the manipulation of culture. At the same time, the initiation of TEP provoked jealousy among the BTWA membership, who saw the potential for funding from international development donors as something that Thangmi had access to only in Nepal, since there were few, if any, comparable organizations operating in Darjeeling. As Rajen put it, "In Nepal they can get real money for development from all of those private donors. We have nothing like that, we have to squeeze every last bit out of the state. That is why ST is so important".

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<sup>95</sup> In 2004, NEFIN published a five-tier classification of all of its member groups. Relying primarily on economic indicators, each group was listed in one of the following categories: "endangered", "highly marginalized", "marginalized", "disadvantaged" and "advantaged". See Gellner (2007), Hangen (2007) and Middleton and Shneiderman (2008) for additional details.

TEP was very short-lived, with only a 3-month window of actual operation.<sup>96</sup> However, it presaged the type of projects to come, and highlighted the necessity of parsing out the differences as well as potential points of pragmatic collaboration, between Thangmi individuals who believed in “livelihood-based” versus “rights-based” approaches to progress, as well as the very real structural differences between the types of resources available to Thangmi in Nepal and India respectively. These debates continue to dominate Thangmi associational politics today.

#### *Cross-Border Conventions: Ritualizing Political Practice*

In May 2005, such issues and the fault lines they indicated within the Thangmi community as a whole were addressed in public at the national level for the first time at the Second National Thami Convention in Kathmandu (the first had been in 1999, when NTS was formed). Approximately 250 Thangmi from five districts of Nepal were present, as well as six from the BTWA executive committee, who joked that the event should have been called the “First *International* Thami Convention”. One other important Thangmi event was to occur at exactly the same time—the annual Bhume Jatra festival in Suspa (as described in Chapter 6).

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<sup>96</sup> This was apparently due to administrative complications at NEFIN, which meant that the funds were only disbursed to NTS three months before the end of the fiscal year during which they had to be spent. Unfortunately, this was not well-understood at the grassroots level, and contributed to the critique of TEP despite the fact that these problems were not the fault of NTS.



The national convention was advertised as a milestone in Thangmi efforts to come together as an ethnic group in its entirety to develop shared goals across national, economic, educational, and other divides. The fact that the Thangmi activist leadership could plan it at a time that conflicted with the ritual event which all of their publications claimed was most central to their ethnic identity—thereby precluding any gurus or other community members committed to ritual practice from participating—demonstrated that the activists had in fact constructed a parallel universe for the ritual construction of ethnicity through political action. In this arena, culture, religion, and history were divorced from their lived contexts and remade as sacred objects in themselves.

While the convention, held in Kathmandu, took place without the participation of any guru (since they were all busy at Bhume Jatra in Dolakha), it constantly referenced them. In their public speeches, the activists represented themselves as having sacrificed the opportunity to participate in important rituals in order to work for forward progress in the political domain. However, when I asked in private whether the date had been chosen intentionally or simply through poor scheduling, I received several whispered answers that “everyone” involved with planning the convention felt that achieving their goals—which included discussing how the NTS could help the BTWA achieve ST status by contributing cultural documentation, as well as mounting a movement to demand similar reservations in Nepal on the basis of their “highly

marginalized” status—would simply be easier this time without gurus and their followers there.<sup>97</sup> The participation of gurus at previous meetings, such as the 2001 gathering in Suspa described above, had only complicated matters for the activists. Their goal now was not to do away with or conceal Thangmi ritual practice, but rather to mould it into a new kind of standardized, *nakali* sacred object detached from the bodies of those who practiced its *sakali* forms. But such *nakali* objects could not exist without the continued parallel existence of the *sakali*, and throughout the conference public speeches conjured glorious images of the gurus engaged in their Bhume Jatra festivities, which were given visual substance in a photo montage on the conference hall wall (some of which I had contributed). Although in day-to-day life the choices were rarely so clear-cut, on this particular weekend, Thangmi individuals had to make a choice between participating in one or the other domain of ritualized action: culture or politics.

The conference began with a moment of silence in memory of the deceased—in particular Basant and Dalamon (a former district-level NTS leader in Dolakha who had been killed just a few days earlier, apparently by Maoists), as well as Ile and Bir Bahadur, the Piskar martyrs of 1984. Several other prominent Thangmi gurus had died since the last convention, but only certain politically active individuals

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<sup>97</sup> As of this writing the Thangmi have not yet received ST status in either West Bengal or Sikkim.

were propitiated as ancestors suitable to the transnational Thangmi political cosmos. In between speeches made by well-known *janajati* activists such as Krishna Bhattachan and Pasang Sherpa in support of the Thangmi association, a cultural performance troupe from Dolakha performed a set of “wedding dances” (also mentioned in Chapter 2).

The initial impetus for such objectifications of culture had come from India, where the state unashamedly set the stage for such manipulations through the legal attachment of benefits to the demonstration of cultural difference. However, such paradigms were now well on their way to becoming naturalized within the Nepali national context as well. This process had been encouraged by the emergence of a Kathmandu-based ethno-political nexus (comprised of the state, NGOs like NEFIN, and INGOs like DFiD) which viewed culture with much the same essentialist worldview that the Indian state did, and linked financial support to the capacity to demonstrate *janajati* traits. It remains to be seen how these paradigm shifts will play out for the next generation of Thangmi, as Nepal moves towards federal restructuring (potentially along ethnic lines), and Darjeeling fights for Gorkhaland once again.

#### *Coda: The Anthropologist's Dilemma*

“How can we develop the backward Thangmi community, how can we best use and preserve our culture?” Tek Raj asks me at the end of our radio interview in Kathmandu in spring 2008. As the presenter for the

first-ever Thangmi language radio program to be broadcast in Nepal, his unaffected self-confidence and obvious passion for speaking his own language is refreshing, perhaps a sign of good things to come in the world of Thangmi ethnic politics. Still we end up here, however, at the assertion of backwardness and the same kind of question that Thangmi always want to ask of me, as a symbol of Western modernity, I think, more than as an anthropologist knowledgeable about their “culture and history”, as I am always introduced. Considering my options, I choose the past of least provocation. “Look at how you have made your own history,” I answer, “This is not a question for me—only young Thangmi like you, wherever you live, know the answer”. The live broadcast only reaches a very small portion of Thangmi—there is no chance of picking it up in the further reaches of Dolakha, let alone Darjeeling. Tek Raj smiles, and I wonder what Nathu—or the Thangmi of 1943, whom I know only through their faded black-and-white *namaste*—would think.

**CHAPTER SIX**  
**Transcendent Territory: Local Deities,  
National Borders and the Problem of Indigeneity**

*Niko nai guru niko nai barmi niko nai bubu kul deva  
Niko nai dharma niko nai karma niko nai nemko mul deva ...  
Niko nai riti niko nai thiti harakai niye tortasa*

Our guru and his assistants, our brothers, our clan deity  
Our religion, our destiny, the chief deity of our territory ...  
Why should we give up our traditions and customs?

– Refrain of the Thangmi language song “Niko Nai Jati”—“Our Ethnicity”, written by Maina and Lal Thami from the Nepali village of Alampu, and recorded in Darjeeling under the auspices of the BTWA on the cassette *Amako Ashis—Mother’s Blessings*

In June 2008, I sat in a Kathmandu conference room watching as a set of increasingly detailed maps were projected on a screen. First Nepal as a whole, then the central Bagmati zone, then Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts, and finally a set of hand-drawn maps representing the proposed contours of a Thangmi autonomous region within a federally restructured Nepal [see Figures 6.1 and 6.2].<sup>1</sup> Tek Bahadur pointed to the scribbled names of Thangmi villages—Alampu, Lapilang, Suspa, Chokati, Piskar, Dhuskun—and spoke passionately about the need for a clearly delineated Thangmi territory that was separate from the Tamang autonomous region, which encompassed the putative Thangmi region on most proposed maps of a federal

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<sup>1</sup> I cannot describe further how the governance and cultural mores of such a Thangmi region were envisioned; here the focus is on how its territorial boundaries were defined. However, this topic is well worth further discussion in the future, especially as the still emerging plans for restructuring the Nepali state become more concrete.

Nepal.<sup>2</sup> This Thangmi activist from Lapilang was in his mid-20s, and, in addition to being an active NTS member, he had been employed at NEFIN as the personal assistant to the general secretary for several years since he first came to Kathmandu as a teenager. Now, he was the Field Coordinator for the *Janajati* Social and Economic Empowerment Project (JANSEEP), which had organized the day's workshop on the place of "highly marginalized *janajatis*" in federal restructuring.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 6.1 Tek Bahadur showing the proposed Thangmi region, Kathmandu, June 2008

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<sup>2</sup> Both Rimal (2007) and Sharma (2007) provide maps showing several different proposals for Nepal's federal structure.

<sup>3</sup> A joint project of NEFIN and CARE-Nepal, JANSEEP was funded by a 1 million Euro grant from the European Commission in Kathmandu, and began in June 2007. It was one of several new projects initiated by large-scale development organizations at around the same time that focused on "cultural preservation" and "identity strengthening" for individual groups targeted for their "highly marginalized" status. In addition to the Thangmi, JANSEEP focused on the Dhanuk and Surel, two much smaller groups. I intend to do future research on this project's intentions and results.



concentrated in several VDCs in Dolakha and Sindhupalchok, he launched into a detailed narration of the portion of the Thangmi origin myth which describes how the group came to settle in the areas where they now primarily live. As Jagat Man spoke, he closed his eyes, and his words began to shift from Nepali to Thangmi and take on the cadence of a guru's *paloke*. Bir Bahadur, who was present at the event in his dual roles of Thangmi community organizer and research assistant, leaned over and whispered to me that Jagat Man had in fact trained as a guru in his youth, but had given up that vocation as he became increasingly involved in politics. I was impressed by Jagat Man's knowledge, but also increasingly aware of the discomfort on the faces of the development workers and activists from other ethnic groups, who began to shift restlessly in their chairs as Jagat Man droned on.

Jagat Man's ritualized recitation of the origin story as evidence for a political claim to Thangmi territory within a "new Nepal" was a clear example of the activist appropriation of originary power for political purposes. To the assembled audience, however, it was a jarring out-of-frame experience, since Jagat Man's recitation came across as a practice effected for soteriological purposes, rather than as a performance enacted for political purposes. The first reason for this was that Jagat Man was speaking mostly in Thangmi, rather than Nepali. The second, perhaps more serious, problem was that his recitation did not delineate Thangmi territory in the political terms of maps and borders, but rather laid claim to it in the ritual terms of



territorial deities, and the special Thangmi relationship with them. The origin myth, which when chanted as a guru's *paloke* within the Thangmi-internal frame of practice, worked to inculcate a subjective sense of belonging to a certain territory, did not automatically work within the Thangmi-external frame of the workshop to transpose this sense of ethnic belonging into the political terms of the nation. Effecting this sort of transposition was not impossible, and in fact had been accomplished successfully by several other Himalayan groups, such as the Gurung (Pettigrew 1999) and Mewahang Rai (Gaenszle 2000), who had long based their political claims to rights over certain pieces of land on their shamans' ability to propitiate the territorial deities of those places.<sup>5</sup> However, the Thangmi activists had not yet fully attended to the work of translation that would make their ritual claims to territory recognizable within the political terms of the state. One of the workshop facilitators, a Gurung activist who had been involved with a similar process of translation within his own community, began to interrupt Jagat Man brusquely, asking Jagat Man to repeat each place name he had mentioned so that the facilitator could plot the locations on the map.

This anecdote shows that while it is not uncommon for an individual, or for that matter, an ethnic collectivity, to simultaneously

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<sup>5</sup> Such efforts to use the content of ritual or cultural practice to legitimize land claims has been a primary strategy of indigenous movements all over the world, and as such are well-documented in the anthropological literature on Australia (Myers 2002; Povinelli 2002), Latin America (Warren and Jackson 2002; Graham 2005; Hale 2006), Southeast Asia (Li 2000), and beyond.

possess ritually produced feelings of territorial belonging, as well as politically produced desires for legal rights to those territories, the two types of relationship to territory do not always interface smoothly. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which the idea of a “Thangmi territory”—as a transcendent ethnic object that is not limited by the pragmatic realities of the national borders within which it is physically located—has been produced by Thangmi individuals through a range of ritualized practices and performances at various places and times. These activities are often conditioned by the particular sociopolitical frameworks of the state(s) in which Thangmi live, as well as by the specific ways in which each national framework mediates individuals’ relationships to the global discursive framework of “indigeneity”, but the territory-as-object that is ultimately produced is not inherently embedded within any single one of these frameworks.

I first show how the Thangmi origin myth itself asserts territorial claims, and then demonstrate how these are ritually maintained through the regular propitiation of territorial deities. I then consider how the political position of Thangmi in Nepal versus that of Thangmi in India—in particular the different types of marginality that they face in each location—has generated different relationships to the idea of Thangmi territory. Finally, I show that although these divergent attitudes towards territory have introduced political tensions that have exacerbated the challenge of synthesizing a transnationally recognizable, singular Thangmi identity, such tensions have been in

part resolved through ritual action which bridges political difference by defining Thangmi territory in a manner that transcends any specific location.

Throughout this discussion, I suggest that Thangmi attitudes towards place contain both an element of primordial attachment and an emphasis on the importance of migration as an identity marker. Using tropes of both territorial belonging and migration as identity-defining paradigms is not unique to the Thangmi, nor does the combination present a paradox until groups encounter state-mandated classificatory schemes which are perceived to put indigeneity, understood as an embodied link to a specific place of origin, and migration—movement of the body away from that place of origin—at odds. This is the difficult juncture at which the Thangmi in India in particular find themselves, with the territorial complexities of their situation as Indian citizens of Nepali heritage making it impossible to construct the “homeland” as a sacred object of identity in the manner that diasporic populations elsewhere have widely been documented as doing (Anderson 1991, Axel 2001). For this reason, I argue that the transnational production of Thangmi identity—and probably those of most other groups of Nepali heritage in India—complicates the “place of origin thesis” which Brian Axel has proposed is definitive of diaspora populations: “the common denominator exemplifying a diaspora is its vital relation to a place of origin that is *elsewhere*” (2001: 8). Although clearly what I have earlier termed “originary power” (see Chapter 3) is

vitality related to the territory in Nepal which Thangmi ritually claim as their own, the political exigencies of life as modern Indian citizens compel Thangmi in that context to subvert the relationship between originary power and their territorial place of origin. This subjective displacement leads to fraught relationships both with themselves as diasporic subjects—another aspect of the “inferior complexity” described in Chapter 3—and with Thangmi in Nepal, creating tensions which can only be overcome through ritual techniques that call upon originary power itself to at once embody and transcend Thangmi territory.

As we shall see, the process of circular migration is itself a set of ritualized movements which mimics some of these techniques. The annually repeated steps of leaving home in Nepal, making the journey to India, setting up a temporary residence, earning money, and heading home again enables those who undertake such movements to experience the particularities of, but ultimately transcend the limits of, single localities. To Thangmi born and raised in India, circular migrants from Nepal become symbols of a deep ambivalence about the “original” (as described in Chapter 3), at once embodying the territory that they seek to distance themselves from, and carrying knowledge of its practices that they desire to possess.

### *Moving into Thangmi Territory*

First we return to the Thangmi origin myth, picking up where we left off in Chapter 3. The second half of the myth, as recited by Jagat Man at the event described above, focuses on the migratory movements of the Thangmi forefather and foremother, and the process through which they stake out the area which remains the area that Thangmi in Nepal claim as their territory today. This episode portrays Ya'apa (pronounced as a single word with a glottal stop in the middle) and Sunari Ama, the Thangmi forefather and foremother, as an itinerant couple living a nomadic lifestyle deep in the forest.<sup>6</sup> Through their clever resistance of a Newar king's attempts at domination, this ancestral couple establish the Thangmi claim to a broad swathe of territory in central-eastern Nepal. The episode also introduces the parallel descent clan system, a major marker of Thangmi identity which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7. The version presented here was recounted by Rana Bahadur, and is continuous with the earlier portion of the narrative that appears in Chapter 3.<sup>7</sup>

Starting from Simraungadh, Ya'apa [also known as Yapati Chuku] and Kanch'apa headed northeast. They followed the Indrawati Khola [N: small river] from the point where it meets the Bhote

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<sup>6</sup> Ya'apa and Sunari Ama are alternately known as Yapati Chuku and Sunari Aji. The former set of terms identifies them as "father" and "mother", while the latter set of terms identifies them as "father-in-law" and "mother-in-law". Given the incestuous nature of their children's marriages, it is indeed the case that they would have been both father and mother, and father-in-law and mother-in-law to all of their children. See Chapter 7 for further discussion of this issue and how different activist publications have dealt with it.

<sup>7</sup> An abridged versions of this episode is published in Shneiderman and Turin (2006). Each of the Thangmi publications includes its own version, which I draw upon in my analysis.

Kosi [N: large river] above Dolalghat. Until they reached Kiratichap, the two brothers traveled together. Near Nuru Pokhari, the two brothers met two sisters named Sunari Ama [also known as Sunari Aji] and Runu Ama. They were both the daughters of a *nag* (N), a snake spirit. The two brothers and two sisters traveled along together. As they walked, Sunari Ama worked on an *arou* (T), a spindle especially for spinning thread from the Himalayan nettle.

When the four travelers came to the confluence of the Sunkosi and Indrawati rivers, they met a fisherman who ferried them across the river in his boat. Near the confluence of the Tama Kosi river they crossed again. They continued walking up the Tama Kosi until they had to cross yet again, but this time only the two brothers and Runu Ama (the younger sister) could fit in the boat, so Sunari Ama (the older sister) was left alone on the other side. They all continued walking up the Tama Kosi, but on opposite sides of the river.

At the confluence of the Charange Khola, the brothers split up. Kanch'apa and Runu Ama walked up the Charange Khola, while Ya'apa and Sunari Ama continued along the Tama Kosi. Kanch'apa became the forefather of the Rai peoples living to the east of the Thangmi.

Finally, after walking on opposite sides of the river for many days, Sunari Ama and Ya'apa came to a place called Nagdaha. This place still has the same name today and is just visible from here.<sup>8</sup> Sunari Ama had been spinning on her *arou* the whole way, and by this time she had enough thread to weave a long rope. She threw the rope across to her husband, and he threw a length back to her to make a doubled-up rope bridge. Sunari finally crossed to the other side to rejoin her husband.

They continued their journey together again, and reached Timure. There they met a black *nag*, and after promising to worship him, they stayed for some time. Then they continued up the Dukujor Khola [just behind the ridge where our house sits.] But there was no place to stay there, just jungle. Then they arrived in Balasode, the area where our house now stands. The place got its name because Sunari Ama wore a gold bracelet [N: *sunko bala*] which she lost here.

Then they moved on again, towards Kuteli Khola. They came to Alamdol where they planted a flag. Then they moved on to Dong Dong Aphug, which is in the jungle above Suspa. They stayed in the cave there, and came to a place called Gaura where

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<sup>8</sup> Rana Bahadur added this commentary as he pointed to Nagdaha from our vantage point at his home in Balasode, Suspa VDC, Dolakha.

there is a nice pond to bathe and wash. They stayed in this area for two or three years.

Then they moved back down the hillside again, to a lower area called Rangathali [also known as Rang Rang Thali]. There they made a hut out of wormwood leaves. They cleared jungle to make arable fields.

In Rangathali they had seven sons and seven daughters. But there was no one for these sons and daughters to marry, except each other, which was impossible since they were brother and sister. So Ya'apa and Sunari sat down to discuss the situation. They decided to assign each of the children separate clans, after which they could marry each other. They gave arrows to their sons and held a shooting event. Wherever each son's arrow landed, that place or thing would become his clan name.<sup>9</sup> Then they went to see what kind of work each daughter was doing, and that became her clan name.

When the brothers went to reclaim their arrows, they found a female child in the woods. She was the daughter of a wild man (T: *apan*; N: *ban manche*). They took her back with them and she joined the family, becoming the eighth sister.

The family lived happily in Rangathali. One day, some of the wood they cut floated down the river. The court fisherman of the Newar king of Dolakha found the pieces floating down the river and was very curious. The fisherman reported to the king every day, and on that day he showed the king the wood pieces.

The king wondered who was living in his territory without his knowledge, and sent his army out to look for the settlers. The army first went up to Surunge Danda to search, and there they met the deity Surung Mahadev. The army made offerings to him. They continued on to Tari Khola, and then to the top of the ridge, where they met the deity Sundrawati Dev.

They returned to Dolakha without finding any people, so the king sent them out again. This time, they went in the direction of the Nagparang ridge. They returned again, empty-handed.

Then they went out again to Khokhosang Khola, and finally to Rangathali, where they found the Thangmi settlers. They reported to the king, who told them to bring the settlers to him. So the army apprehended Ya'apa, and brought him to Dolakha. Ya'apa carried with him a wild pheasant to offer to the king.

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<sup>9</sup> The clan system and names are discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

Instead of appreciating this gift, the king reprimanded Ya'apa for killing game in the royal woods without his permission. He told Ya'apa to return again and fixed a date.

Ya'apa returned, this time bringing with him a deer. The king told him to return yet again, and he did, carrying a mountain goat. Each time Ya'apa presented himself before the king, he was scolded for killing game. Finally, the king told Ya'apa that he would be executed on the following day.

Ya'apa returned home, and told Sunari Ama of his fate. Until then, she hadn't accompanied him to meet the king, but she promised to go with him on the day of his execution.

So they went together the next day. Sunari Ama wore her hair in a bun. When they arrived, her bun loosened and a golden plate fell out of her hair. Then a golden deer fell out. She offered both of these objects to the king. These offerings made him so happy that he relented and did not kill Ya'apa.

Instead, he asked them how much land they wanted, and Sunari Ama and Ya'apa replied: "No more than the size of a buffalo skin". The king urged them to accept more, but they refused. They requested only that a dried buffalo skin be brought so that they could show the king the exact size. The skin was brought and Ya'apa cut it into long, thin strips, which he staked out with a set of wooden nails in the shape of a huge square, encircling much of the kingdom. He demanded that the king honor his offer and let them have a piece of land that size. The king was so impressed with the wit and ingenuity of the Thangmi couple that he granted their request. They returned home as the rightful owners of a large piece of land stretching from Alampu in the north, to the Sun Kosi river in the west [the southern and eastern borders are not clearly named].<sup>10</sup>

Ya'apa then told his seven sons and daughters [who were now married to each other] to migrate to different parts of this area. In order to decide where they would each go, the seven brothers climbed to the top of Kiji Topar ["Black Summit", the Thangmi name for Kalinchok], where they held a second archery

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<sup>10</sup> Megh Raj explains that, "... there are various versions of the offer and acceptance of land. A few maintain that they were offered land as much as they could cover in a walk of seven days. Thus the offer covered land from the base of Dolakha to the base of the Himalaya (having a length of 15 *kosh* / 30 miles) extending up to Tamakoshi in the east and Surke in the west. Another version has it that when Sonari [sic] loosened her hair, it covered an area extending from Lebangkhu to Ubhare, Rukubigu to Dolakha which was immediately granted them by the king. Yet another version is that they were offered as much land as they could clear" (Reng 1999: 6). The use of a buffalo skin cut into strips to mark territory also appears in the story of founding of the Boudhanath stupa (Slusser 1982).



contest. Each brother followed his arrow and went to live with his wife wherever it landed. The places were as follows, by descending order of the age of the sons who settled there): Surkhe, Suspa, Dumkot, Lapilang, Kusati, Alampu, and Kuthisyang. Through the *kipat* system, the Dolakha king officially recognized the borders of the Thangmi land as encompassing all of these areas, and so it was.<sup>11</sup>

The Dolakha king levied a tax that the Thangmi had to pay once a year for their rights to stay on his territory. After this had been established, Biche Raj, who was the king of Thimi, declared war on the Dolakha king. Biche Raj sent a formal declaration of war to Dolakha in a letter. The Dolakha king was so afraid that he surrendered to Biche Raj before the war had even begun, and fled from Dolakha. The Thangmi were afraid, because they had already won favor with the Dolakha king, but they didn't know how they would fare under the new king from Thimi. As they feared, Biche Raj (who was a reincarnation of Vishnu, the patron deity of the Chhetri) gave the administrative posts and important jobs to the Newar, while he gave the Thangmi hard physical work. This division is still so today.

### *Staking a Claim*

References to Simraungadh crop up in almost every Thangmi response to questions about their origins. Over the course of my fieldwork, a wide range of individuals in as many locations made variations of the statement, "We came from Simraungadh [sometimes pronounced Simanghat]". Despite the certainty with which this is stated, none of the origin myths, *paloke*, or other practices make any more detailed reference to this place, and there is no symbolic imagery associated with its status as the source of Thangmi origins.

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<sup>11</sup> *Kipat* is most concisely glossed as the "customary system of land tenure" (Forbes 1999: 115). See also Caplan 2000 [1970] and Regmi (1976). However, its full meaning in the contemporary context of ethnic politics in Nepal is much more complex than this. In short, it has come to be used as a shorthand for "indigenous territory", through a series of ideological and symbolic moves which will be discussed in further detail below.

Simraungadh is the name of an ancient settlement in the Tarai, of which there are now only archaeological remains.<sup>12</sup> According to Vajracharya and Shrestha (2031 VS), as reaffirmed by Miller (1997[1979]) and Slusser (1982), it is possible that there was a link between an early Mithila king, Hari Simha Deva, and the Dolakha region. When his kingdom “straddling the Bihar–Tarai border” (Slusser 1982: 55) was conquered by Muslim forces in 1324–25 AD, King Hari Simha Deva fled towards Dolakha, but died en route. His sons and entourage apparently did reach their destination, but were imprisoned by Dolakha’s rulers. It is possible that it was Hari Simha Deva’s Tarai principality that the Thangmi refer to as Simraungadh, and that some part of Thangmi ancestry may be traced to that location. Several of the Thangmi publications attempt to pursue this supposition in more depth, but with the limited historical sources at their disposal (which are for the most part the same as those to which I have access), it is difficult to come up with the conclusive evidence of their own roots that they seek. For instance, Megh Raj bemoans the fact that, “the conflicting versions [of the story of Thangmi settlement] make it all the more difficult to verify the truth” (Reng 1999: 3).

Regardless of their specific point of origin, as they travel along Nepal’s elaborate network of rivers, Yapati and Sunari are clearly migrants from elsewhere, entering a domain already under the control of another ethnic entity—the antecedents of the contemporary Dolakha

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<sup>12</sup> For details of Simraungadh as an archaeological site, see Ballinger (1973).

Newar.<sup>13</sup> The Thangmi presence at first challenges the Newar king's authority, but when they show themselves as willing and capable cultivators of the wild expanse beyond his direct administration, he relents and allows them to settle. As mentioned briefly above and in Chapter 4, the earliest known evidence of a Thangmi presence in Dolakha is an inscription at the Dolakha Bhimsen temple dating to 1568 AD, which establishes that the Thangmi were by that time tax-paying subjects of Newar rulers. Despite their apparent subjugation, the myth suggests that there was still perhaps room for the expression of Thangmi agency within a Newar domain (a theme explored in depth in Chapter 8), and when the Newar king is defeated, the Thangmi are concerned for their future as subjects of a Chhetri king.

The broader context of economic relationships between the Thangmi, Newar and caste Hindus is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, and the overarching sociopolitical framework is described in Chapter 8. Here, suffice it to say that this part of the *paloke* continues situating the Thangmi vis-à-vis other ethnic groups by including the following list of the kings and queens of each ethnic group as an essential part of the chant, and thereby the Thangmi frame of reference:

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<sup>13</sup> There are no substantive ethnographic sources on the Dolakha Newar. Carol Genetti (1994) has published a descriptive and historical account of their dialect of the Newar language, but little has been written (particularly in English) about their cultural history. For this reason, it is difficult to provide a more nuanced description of the people that Thangmi settlers encountered. Calling them "Newar" may be anachronistic, since they may not have conceptualized themselves in such terms in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but for lack of a more accurate, historicized term, I use "Newar" to refer both to the contemporary inhabitants of Dolakha bazaar, and their ancestors.

*syu syu raja syu syu rani* (Thangmi)  
*hai hai raja hai hai rani* (Kirant)  
*golma raja golma rani* (Tamang)  
*khando raja khando rani* (Newar)

These four pairs of apocryphal kings' (N: *raja*) and queens' (N: *rani*) names comprise a lilting refrain in every propitiation chant, and with some minor variation, Thangmi informants always identify these kings with the ethnic groups listed in parentheses above. Gurus explain that Syu Syu Raja and Rani are alternative titles of address for Yapati and Sunari, the Thangmi ancestors, and as such they are always ritually invoked in relation to the ancestors of the three other ostensibly indigenous ethnic entities (i.e. non-caste Hindu) with whom the Thangmi come in contact. Even within the territory that Thangmi consider their own, then, they are never represented in isolation, but always situated in relation to ethnic others, some of whose presence predated Thangmi settlement in the area.

When the Dolakha king withdraws his threat of execution and instead asks Yapati and Sunari how much land they would like, they demarcate their desired territory by staking out strips of dry buffalo skin with a set of wooden nails (T: *thurmi*; N: *kila* ; Tib: *phurba*). These nails, which were described in more detail in Chapter 2, remain one of the most important objects within the Thangmi ritual inventory. In contemporary practice, they continue to be an important motif in establishing claims to Thangmi territory, for instance during Bhume Jatra as discussed below, and in the funerary rituals discussed in

Chapter 7. Rather conveniently, the domain that Yapati and Sunari claim for the Thangmi more or less maps on to the reality of contemporary Thangmi settlement. A large area on either side of the high Kalinchok ridge—what is now the eastern edge of Sindhupalchok district and the western edge of Dolakha district—is deeded in myth to the Thangmi ancestors.

Having established their own settlement in Rangathali (still a place name in contemporary Suspa–Kshamawati VDC) at the far south-east corner of this domain, Yapati and Sunari must then find a way to assert their influence across the broad swathe of territory they are granted. Through the archery contest held at the top of Kalinchok, they direct each of their sons to settle in seven primary villages throughout the domain. Although the list of villages varies in each rendition of the tale, they are always areas that have Thangmi majorities or substantial minorities in the present.

### *Kipat, Identity and Indigeneity in Nepal*

The quest for historical evidence of Thangmi territorial rights under the system of customary land tenure known as *kipat* plays a central role in contemporary Thangmi activist projects in Nepal. This is hardly surprising, since the history of *kipat* has been closely linked to the notion of indigeneity in Nepal, as the latter concept has entered popular discourse over the last several decades.

As Regmi explains:

rights under Kipat tenure emerged not because of a royal grant, but because the owner, as a member of a particular ethnic community, was in customary occupation of lands situated in a particular geographical area. (1976: 87)

Beginning in 1774, a series of royal decrees issued by Nepal's Shah kings formalized these rights for a range of groups who now call themselves *janajati*, including the Thangmi.<sup>14</sup> With domain over territory for specific groups "confirmed only on the ground that possession had been continuous 'from the time of your ancestors'" (Regmi 1976: 89, citing early government documents), the fledgling Nepali state reified in legal terms what was until then a circumstantial link between ethnicity and ancestral territory. Over time, however, as the state sought both to exploit the vast natural resources embedded in *kipat* lands, and to bring individual ethnic populations under tighter rein, *kipat* rights were gradually undermined through a series of localized land confiscations. For the Thangmi, such events appear to have occurred in 1836 (Regmi 1976: 99)<sup>15</sup> and in the early 1900s (Peet 1978: 231),<sup>16</sup> which contributed to the initial impetus for migration to Darjeeling, as described in Chapter 4. After the end of Rana rule in 1951, *kipat* rights were gradually diminished through a series of legislative acts, and by 1968, all legal distinctions between *kipat* and

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<sup>14</sup> Regmi lists the Rai, Majhiya, Bhote, Yakha, Tamang, Hayu, Chepang, Baramu, Danuwar, Sunuwar, Kumhal, Pahari, Thami, Sherpa, Majhi, and Lepcha (1976: 88).

<sup>15</sup> "Make allotments from the *Kipat* lands of Hayus, Danuwars, Paharis, Chepangs, and Thamis at the prescribed rates, and confiscate the surplus area" (Regmi 1976: 99). In the main text, Regmi lists the year as 1936, but the footnote in which the government directive is reproduced lists the year as 1836. The broader context of Regmi's writing confirms that the former must be a typo, and the event must have occurred in 1836.

<sup>16</sup> Peet (1978) in fact claims that the *kipat* system was abolished at this time.

the generic form of state landholding (known as *raikar* in Nepali) had disappeared. However, *kipat* was not comprehensively abolished until the cadastral survey of 1994, “which legally ended the *kipat* system, practically and symbolically mark[ing] the government’s victory in this 200-year struggle” (Forbes 1999: 116).

Perhaps it is only a coincidence that this is the same year in which the then Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN) inserted the term “indigenous” in its name, to become the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) (R. Pradhan 2007: 17). Regardless, this temporal convergence highlights how the diminishing recognition of a legal relationship between ethnic individuals and their territory, as defined within the national framework of the Nepali state through the concept of *kipat*, was paralleled by an increasing recognition of an embodied relationship between ethnic individuals and their territory, as defined within the international framework of development discourse and the UN through the concept of indigeneity. As Rajendra Pradhan explains, the adoption of the term “indigenous” by ethnic activists in Nepal as a term to describe themselves followed quickly on the heels of the UN Declaration of the Year of Indigenous Peoples in 1993 and the ensuing 1994 Declaration of the Decade of Indigenous Peoples (1997: 16). In the documents of the UN and associated agencies, indigeneity was conceptualized as an essential quality that inheres in one’s body (Kuper 2003)—expressed in Nepal as “we are indigenous”, rather than “we have *kipat*”—and which depends on conscious self-

recognition in order to work as a category. As the ILO Convention on the rights of indigenous peoples states, “Self-identification as indigenous or tribal shall be regarded as a fundamental criterion for determining the groups to which the provisions of this Convention apply.”<sup>17</sup> The now widespread use of the term “indigenous” in political discourse,<sup>18</sup> as well as in legislation,<sup>19</sup> in Nepal has had the effect of inscribing the relationship between ethnicity and territory in the bodies of “indigenous” individuals themselves,<sup>20</sup> putting the onus on them to develop a new set of techniques to objectify that relationship and make it recognizable to others, in the absence of state policies which objectify that relationship in legal terms in the manner that *kipat* once did.

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/62.htm>, accessed November 19, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Others are doing the important work of understanding how this concept has come to be naturalized in Nepal since 1994 (see especially Tamang 2008). For broader anthropological discussions of the problematics inherent in the category of “indigenous” see Beteille (1998), Kuper (2003), de la Cadena and Starn (2007) and Shah (2007).

<sup>19</sup> In 2002 the NFDIN Act was passed, recognizing “indigenous peoples” as a legal category for the first time, and in 2007 Nepal’s government ratified the ILO’s Convention 169 on the rights of indigenous peoples, becoming only the second Asian country to do so after the Philippines. In the text of that document, indigenous peoples are defined as, “Peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonization or the establishment of present State boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions” <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/62.htm>, accessed November 19, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> André Beteille (1998) and Adam Kuper (2003) have both remarked upon the essentialist aspects of the concept of indigeneity, suggesting that to varying degrees, the concept reinscribes the “crude anthropological association of race and culture” (Beteille 1998: 190). Kaushik Ghosh also contends that, “a discourse of essential indigeneity severely limits the creativity of *adivasi* politics” (2006: 504).



This is where Jagat Man's recitation at the workshop with which this chapter began fell short of the mark, and why Thangmi activists, along with ethnic activists from many other groups in Nepal, were obsessed with finding "proof" of their indigeneity. Evidence of their former status as *kipat* holders was perceived to be a powerful form of proof, since legal legitimation of ethnic territory in the past could be conceptualized as historical precedent for new policies. Within this context, Thangmi activists in Nepal attempted to emphasize the tenuous evidence for their historical rights to *kipat*, while downplaying the aspects of their origin myth which suggest that their ancestors were migrants who traveled the length and breadth of the Himalayas before they carved out a piece of territory to call their own.<sup>21</sup> As Megh Raj writes in his article entitled, "At the Crossroads of Proof and Conjecture":

It is a common belief among Thamis that in the past, Newar kings used to rule in Dolakha and that the primogenitors of Thamis were awarded *kipat* land from the Newar kings...We can safely assume that there must have been some proof and witness when a portion of the kingdom changed hands ... it can be presumed that the bestower of *kipat* as well as the beneficiary must have in their possession certain written documents or stone inscriptions signifying the exchange ... A few cases of such documents are still in possession of some of the Dolakha

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<sup>21</sup> Origin myths that focus on migrations to areas which only later became thought of *kipat* are typical among Himalayan groups (see especially Gaenszle 2000). For those groups whose origin stories tell of migration from Tibet (for instance the Sherpa, Tamang, Gurung), historical links to this predominantly non-Hindu region to the north have been deployed as a positive marker of identity within the context of the self-proclaimed "non-Hindu" *janajati* movement (McHugh 2006). However, for the Thangmi, whose story locates their origins in Simraugadh, somewhere along the present-day Nepal-India border, no such valorization is possible within the frame of *janajati* politics, and activists focus instead on the historicity of *kipat*.

Newars. In the real sense, the logic of elders deserve consideration. Hopefully a few of those documents may be in the Thami script. (Reng 1999: 16)

In the age of indigeneity, the concept of *kipat* itself has thus become refigured as a short-hand for evidence of ancestral rights to certain territories. Although the legal system no longer exists, use of the term *kipat* now expresses the historical consciousness of having once had it, as in the simple Nepali phrase, *Yo hamro kipa ho*—“This is our *kipa*”, which I heard often from Thangmi in Dolakha in reference to the area in which they lived. However, consciousness in itself does not secure legal rights, and it is for this reason that activists seek written proof (which, if found in the non-existent Thangmi script, would be the holy grail of Thangmi ethnic activism in Nepal) to show the government that it had once legally recognized the link between ethnicity and territory and could not forever evade demands to do so once again.

The few shreds of historical record and mythical narrative that Thangmi can draw upon in their claims to indigeneity are complicated by their constant references to the Newar population of Dolakha. It is fairly clear that the ancestors of the contemporary Newar were already in the area when the Thangmi began to settle there, and that the Thangmi were granted political rights to their territory by these rulers of Dolakha. This history complicates the standard *janajati* narrative of land lost to Indo-Aryan invaders (whom indirectly, if not directly, are cast as representatives of the Hindu state), which Regmi recounts as follows:

The *Kipat* system may have been a relic of the customary form of land control which communities of Mongoloid or autochthonous tribal origin established in areas occupied by them before the immigration of racial groups of Indo-Aryan origin. (1976: 87–88)

This racialized portrayal of two dualistically opposed groups (which recalls the “interface” model of Himalayan ethnicity described in Chapter 3) does not account for the more complex history of Thangmi settlement, or that of most other groups in Nepal, for that matter.

Rajendra Pradhan posed the problem of indigeneity for Nepal as follows in 1994:

Do we want to deny the history and tradition of a Nepal where all communities are descended from migrants from outside during different periods of history? Specially when these different waves of migrants have either intermingled or broken up to form the numerous ethnic/linguistic communities which today constitute the peoples of Nepal...

In other words, this whole question of indigenous peoples is a false problem because indigenous peoples do not exist in Nepal; or if they do, the majority of the Nepalis are indigenous, including many of the Bahuns and Chhetris. (R. Pradhan 1994: 45)

I heard similar arguments frequently over the course of my fieldwork in Nepal, generally from individuals who did not consider themselves members of *janajati* groups. Such arguments may represent history most accurately from an objective perspective, but they are simply unacceptable to most self-defined indigenous activists, who posit a one-to-one correlation between each piece of territory and a single group who is indigenous to it. Nepal’s 2007 ratification of the ILO Convention on the rights of indigenous peoples demonstrated that the activists had won this debate at the public policy level (regardless of

what individuals continued to think in private), and current proposals for federal restructuring along ethnic lines have taken the tenets of indigeneity to their next logical step.

For Thangmi activists in Nepal, the problem with all this was that the scanty evidence they had of their own indigeneity (both oral and written), implicated the Newar as at least equally, if not more, indigenous, in terms of their chronologically earlier residence in the area.<sup>22</sup> The forebears of the contemporary Newar—who themselves cannot easily be defined as either “Indo-Aryan” or “Mongoloid”, an issue which continues to cause both Newar and *janajati* activists in general much consternation—were clearly already present when the Thangmi, or people who became the Thangmi, settled in Dolakha and its environs. The Thangmi settlers were in fact granted land rights by a local king, not by the central Nepali state. Later on, from the perspective of the state, Thangmi *kipat* was certainly incorporated into that national framework (as affirmed by Regmi’s citations of state documents that mention the group), but from the Thangmi perspective, the local Newar rulers of Dolakha remained the primary sociopolitical authority in relation to which they defined themselves (see Chapter 8 for further discussion).

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<sup>22</sup> Kuper (2003) describes how this sort of uneasiness with histories of migration is common among people who identify as indigenous the world over. He cites Hugh Brody’s (2001) story of a Cree student in Canada who argues against historical evidence for Cree migration across the Bering Straits because, “If their ancestors were themselves immigrants, then perhaps the Cree might not after all be so very different from the *Mayflower*’s passengers or even the huddled masses that streamed across the Atlantic in the 1890s” (2003: 392).

Although this close relationship with the Newar may be seen as a liability by contemporary Thangmi activists in Nepal who seek to paint themselves as the sole indigenous inhabitants of the area they would now like to claim as Thangmi territory, I suggest that it is in fact this in-depth, inter-ethnic historical relationship with the Newar at the local level which provides some of the conditions for Thangmi activists in India to conceptualize Thangmi territory as an ethnic possession that transcends the confines of the Nepali nation-state. At the time at which Thangmi began migrating to India, they may not have envisioned their right to territory in relation to the national socio-political order of the Nepali state, but rather as a set of local power relations which located the Dolakha Newar at the top. It was first of all the Thangmi ancestors and territorial deities who granted dominion over territory to those who propitiated them through the ritual actions that will be described shortly, and second of all the Dolakha Newar who tacitly allowed Thangmi to maintain this special relationship with their territorial deities without political intervention. The ritual relationships enacted every year at Dasain between the Thangmi and the Dolakha Newar cemented Thangmi territorial claims vis-à-vis the local Newar authority (see Chapter 8), who in turn provided a buffer of sorts between the Thangmi and the emerging Nepali state. As Holmberg, March, and Tamang have suggested, "... most renditions of Nepali history over emphasize the effects of central power" (1999: 7). The fact that Thangmi were not listed in the 1854 Muluki Ain suggests that

indeed, they were not fully incorporated into the Nepali state at that seminal moment of consolidation.<sup>23</sup> However, as the myth itself suggests, the Newar could not protect the Thangmi forever once the “Chhetri king” came to power,<sup>24</sup> and eventually the encroachment of high-caste settlers became one of the factors leading to the beginnings of migration to India as described in Chapter 4. Rather than seeing these movements as an escape from an already entirely hegemonic state, however, we might see them as an exit from a crumbling set of tried and tested local power relations, the successor to which was anxiety-producing in its unfamiliar, but apparently exploitative, nature. If this was indeed the scenario, the Thangmi who first arrived in India at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would have conceptualized themselves as residents of their own ritually legitimated territory, with fealty to Newar authorities at the edges of their locality, rather than as subjects of a Nepali state.

### *The Problem of Indigeneity in India*

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<sup>23</sup> It is curious that Thangmi were listed as rightful holders of *kipat* lands, but were not classified anywhere in the Muluki Ain. Investigation of this apparent paradox is beyond the scope of my discussion here, but well worth further research.

<sup>24</sup> They could and apparently did intervene when more recent high-caste settlers went too far in appropriating Thangmi lands. According to Miller, when high-caste settlers “took the step of preventing the Thamias from getting the harvest” (1997[1979]: 90), Newar priests interceded and negotiated on behalf of the Thangmi with the Bahun–Chhetri families who were blocking Thangmi access, and that the problem did not recur in the future (1997[1979]: 91). Newar efforts to protect Thangmi territorial integrity may have emerged largely out of their own interests in appropriating Thangmi ritual services and labor for themselves, rather than any particular sympathy for the Thangmi (see Chapter 8).

This history, and the ensuing century of colonial and post-colonial Indian nation-building, makes the indigeneity equation for the modern descendants of early Thangmi migrants in Darjeeling entirely different from the one which troubles their Nepali counterparts. Rajendra Pradhan's argument against the concept of indigeneity, as presented above, is in fact very similar to the legal stance of the Indian state. Alpa Shah explains:

The official position of the Indian State is that there are no indigenous people in India since its complex migration patterns mean that, unlike some countries such as Australia or Canada, it is impossible to establish who the original settlers in a particular region are. (2007: 2)

However, Shah continues to describe how groups officially recognized by the government as Scheduled Tribes in India—commonly referred to as “tribals”—in fact consider themselves to fit the “indigenous slot” (Li 2000, Karlsson 2003). Members of such groups have put the Indian government under pressure to adopt the legal category of indigeneity since 1985, when representatives of Indian tribal groups began participating in UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples (WGIP) meetings (Shah 2007: 2). Accession to the transnational category of “indigenous” is by no means a *fait accompli* for Indian tribal groups, however, both because the state continues to resist that move, and because, as Kaushik Ghosh suggests:

...in certain postcolonial contexts like India, WGIP-like transnationalism introduces “a politics of place” that undermines the struggles through which indigenous people have historically attempted—and to some extent significantly succeeded—to

wrest certain autonomies within the formal dominion of modern states. (2006: 502)

Such arguments build upon a long history of scholarly and political debate over the colonial construction of the category of “tribe” in opposition to that of caste (Ghurye 1963; Corbridge 1988; Bates 1995; S. Guha 1999; Dirks 2001).<sup>25</sup> At stake is the validity and ownership of the term *adivasi*, which literally translates as “original inhabitants”, and is often used by groups recognized by the Indian state as Scheduled Tribes to describe themselves.

As described in Chapter 5, Indian citizens of Nepali heritage in Darjeeling were not particularly interested in claiming membership in this category until after 1990, when a constellation of political factors came together to push them towards assuming an *adivasi* identity. Once this became the objective, however, groups like the Thangmi were compelled to think carefully about what seeking tribal status would mean for their relationships to a range of territories, both in India and Nepal, and their public representations of these relationships. Ironically, although India does not recognize the concept of indigeneity, the term *adivasi* is popularly perceived to index a link between ethnicity and territory for those recognized as Scheduled Tribes within Indian national discourse, in much the same way as the term indigeneity does within transnational discourses. Through print and visual media that described *adivasi* struggles in other parts of the

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<sup>25</sup> Shah’s 2007 overview of the concept of indigeneity in India provides extensive additional references to this debate.



country, which were prominent throughout the 1980s and 1990s (in Assam, Meghalaya and Jharkhand, for instance), Thangmi activists in Darjeeling became aware of this perceived requirement of the tribal or *adivasi* category to which they aspired, despite the fact that government criteria for ST status included only the obtuse statement that tribes should exhibit “geographical isolation”. Thangmi in India thus set about considering how to represent themselves as autochthonous to the areas in which they lived, and often used the English term “indigenous” in conversations with me to explain this part of their project. As Rajen explained at a meeting in 2004:

We are definitely *adivasi*, just look at how backwards we are and how unique our language and culture are. But the government won't recognize these things unless we can also show how “indigenous” we are.

The problem with demonstrating such indigeneity was twofold. First of all, it was common knowledge that the ancestors of contemporary Indian citizens of Nepali heritage had at some point migrated to the area from Nepal. Second of all, the ethnic heterogeneity of the pan-Nepali community, and the mixed residential patterns throughout both urban and rural areas of Darjeeling, meant that there was no specific territory to which the Thangmi (or any other group of Nepali heritage in Darjeeling involved in applying for ST status) could claim exclusive indigeneity. Except, of course, if they wanted to piggy-back upon the claims to indigeneity that Thangmi activists in Nepal were already making in relation to “their” territory in

Dolakha and Sindhupalchok. This was a simultaneously exciting and impossible option for Thangmi activists in India. Exciting, because many Thangmi in India were familiar with the idea of Thangmi territory as articulated through ritual practice that invoked territorial deities (even if they did not often participate in such practices themselves), and making political claims to indigeneity on the basis of their special relationship with territorial deities would be a particularly elegant manner of transforming divine into political recognition. Impossible, however, because claiming territory in Nepal as a marker of indigeneity in India was not only illogical, but dangerous, since the threat of being characterized as foreigners in their own country due to their perceived associations with Nepal was always imminent. For Indians of Nepali heritage in Mizoram and Meghalaya, such characterizations as “foreign” had resulted in mass expulsions in the 1980s, as they had in the early 1990s for people of Nepali heritage who thought themselves to be citizens of Bhutan (Hutt 2003).

It was such insecurities—wrought by the paradox of the 1950 Indo–Nepal treaty which made dual citizenship impossible, despite the fact that the permeable border was the site of constant movement between the two countries—that made it inconceivable for Thangmi in India to produce a diasporic identity through a simple affirmation of a “vital relation with the point of origin”. That point of origin was, in a sense, too close to be a safe source of identity, too unbounded in its potential to claim them, rather than allowing them to maintain the

agency to claim it. Instead, Thangmi in India felt that they needed to constantly disavow links to Nepal in order to claim their rights as Indian citizens, which included the right to demand special treatment via Scheduled Tribe status. At the same time, however, the entire complex of ritual practice which Thangmi activists in India intended to deploy as evidence of their tribal nature took for granted the existence of a Thangmi territory in Nepal, the place names and territorial deities of which were recited at every ritual instance in an entirely embedded manner that defied erasure.

### *Encountering the Originary Other*

The puzzle of how to at once make use of the concept of Thangmi territory to shore up their claims to indigeneity in India, while simultaneously disassociating such territory from a physical location within Nepal's national borders, was a key issue for Thangmi activists in India during my fieldwork. It led to much dissimulation and manipulation of known history among members of the BTWA, as well as to increasingly contentious attempts to access originary knowledge which might help guide the way.

One attempt to solve this conundrum involved the assertion that Thangmi had in fact originally lived in India, but had then migrated to Nepal, whence they eventually returned to their point of origin in India. Inverting the emphasis that Thangmi activists in Nepal placed on the origin story's trope of settlement in Dolakha, Thangmi activists in India

focused instead on the trope of migration from Simraugadh. They argued that the historical site of Simraugadh was inside India's border, even though the contemporary settlement of the same name is just inside the border of modern Nepal. For example, a document compiled by the Sikkim branch of the BTWA entitled *Thami Community and their Rituals*, which was submitted to the Union Minister for Tribal Affairs, claimed (in English) that:

From the books written by some eminent historian the THAMI might have migrated from Asia Minor and settled down in Simroungad (the capital of TIRHUTDOYA 1097–1326 A.D., map is enclosed herewith),<sup>26</sup> bordering present India and Nepal in Western Indian frontiers ... This ethnic Thami community is an aboriginal race residing as indigenous inhabitants in North–East region of India from the hoary past. (ASTS 2005: 1)

If Simraugadh had indeed been in India, then Thangmi could claim indigeneity on that basis, even though they had spent several generations living in Nepal before returning to their “homeland” in India. During my 2004 fieldwork in Darjeeling, this argument was made most forcefully by Rajen, the general secretary of the BTWA, who stated it at several meetings, and even requested me to back up this assertion to a journalist at a public meeting. I refused to do so, but nonetheless this version of history appeared in quotation marks attached to my name in the following day's paper. I later learned that Rajen had told other BTWA members that my scholarship was not to be trusted because I was not willing to provide “proof” for this alternative history.

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<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, the map is not actually enclosed with my copy of the document.

In interviews with me, Rajen refused to talk about his family history, since admitting that his own parents migrated from Nepal as late as the 1940s would have created an embarrassing contradiction to his public statements about Thangmi indigeneity in India. During one video interview in early 2005, Rajen accidentally let down his guard and alluded to his father's early experiences in Darjeeling as a migrant from Nepal. Some minutes later, he requested that I erase that part of the tape. I complied, but I already knew the details of his family history from interviews with other less militant community members.<sup>27</sup> Rajen's claim was wishful thinking, which even other Thangmi who initially supported it eventually came to question: if the Tamang and Limbu had received Scheduled Tribe status (in 2003), and they too were known to have migrated from Nepal, then why bother going so far to claim indigeneity on what were obviously specious grounds?

I first became aware of how much interpersonal tension these issues could create between Thangmi activists in India and circular migrants from Nepal in 2004 during a *deusi* "cultural program" organized by the BTWA on the Hindu holiday of Tihar (also known as Diwali). BTWA officers had requested a group of Thangmi migrants from Nepal to perform "traditional" dances and songs in the Thangmi

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<sup>27</sup> I feel comfortable presenting this anecdote here because during conversations in my second period of long-term fieldwork in Darjeeling in late 2005, Rajen had softened his position on this issue, and apologized for having demanded that I erase the tape. He then told me that I was free to use the entire interview as I saw fit (as mentioned above, the tape had already been erased, but I can recall the content). By this time, Rajen was no longer General Secretary of the BTWA, and seemed to be engaged in a period of intensive self-reflection about the positions he had taken while he held that office.

language in order to raise money for the BTWA, since the BTWA leadership did not themselves possess the cultural knowledge to put on such a performance. I traveled by jeep with the BTWA leadership to the site of the program in Jorebunglow, some kilometers outside of Darjeeling bazaar. When we arrived, the performers were not yet there, despite the fact that one of the BTWA officers had apparently spent the previous day confirming the details of the program with them. We waited for over an hour, which the BTWA officers spent complaining about how unreliable, uncultured and unsavory Thangmi from Nepal were, and how their behavior gave all Thangmi a bad reputation. When the performers arrived, all grown men, Rajen gave them a dressing down, calling them “boys” and asking them how they expected Thangmi culture to develop if they could not even be on time for a performance. The Thangmi from Nepal shrugged off this critique, asking how Rajen expected Thangmi culture to develop if their stomachs were not full, and requested some drinks and snacks as they prepared to perform.

While we then waited for the audience to gather—a multi-generational, multi-ethnic group from the surrounding residential area—I interviewed the performers, and learned that they typically spent six months of the year in Darjeeling, although most of them had wives and children back in Nepal, all in the village of Lapilang. When I asked which place they considered home, one of them said, “This is our village, but that is also our village. Really, they are the same

village.” Overhearing this conversation, Rajen approached just as I was writing the label for the videocassette which I had cued up to record their performance, and said, “Well, since it’s all one village anyway, please don’t write on the cassette that they are actually from Nepal. Just write that this performance occurred in Darjeeling.” It is in this sense that Thangmi territory can be envisioned as a translocal ethnic territory, which transcends the national borders which may appear to circumscribe it on the ground. I compromised with Rajen’s request by writing “Lapilang dancers in Jorebunglow” on the cassette, using local rather than national descriptors.

This experience hit home to me how circular migrants from Nepal often became foils for the struggles of Thangmi in India to express the complex territorialities which shaped their own sense of Thangminess. On the one hand, the cultural knowledge and skill in both practice and performance of Thangmi from Nepal were valued as links to the originary, which could work on both affective and pragmatic levels to articulate Thangmi identity in a positive manner. On the other hand, circular migrants embodied the national other which Thangmi in India (like other people of Nepali heritage in India) worked so hard to define themselves in contradistinction to, so appropriation of their knowledge to shore up Thangmi claims of indigeneity in India was in some ways a political gamble. Psychologically speaking, however, for BTWA activists who were deeply enmeshed in the pragmatism of tribal politics, but felt insecure about

their own lack of cultural knowledge, listening to the songs about territorial deities and Thangmi villages that the Lapilang group performed—the lyrics of which were much like the ones cited in the epigraph to this chapter—boosted morale by reminding them of how divine recognition worked. “See,” Rajen said to me, as we watched the program finally get underway and he settled into his seat with a drink, “How can the government deny us? All of those deities the boys are singing about, aren’t they our deities too? They should help us in our ‘campaign’.”

### *The Ritual Solution*

That these deities, and the territory they marked as Thangmi, could transcend the physicality of geographical and political borders was further made clear to me some weeks later at an all night ritual conducted by Latte Apa to banish malevolent spirits from a Darjeeling Thangmi household that had recently experienced a spell of bad luck. I was offered cheap whiskey (T: *ding ding*, literally “red red”), which here replaced the ever-present home-brewed beer (T: *tong*) of such rituals in Nepal. Smoke from the burning *uirengpati* (T) incense made from the fresh leaves of the wormwood tree began to permeate the entire wood-paneled room.

Ajay, an overweight teenager born and raised in Darjeeling, took me aside to ask in English, “Do you understand what he is saying?” “A little bit,” I responded. “So then you know that he is taking us back to



the original birthplace of all Thamis in order to get the blessings of all of the important deities there?" "Yes", I said. "But you see," said Ajay, "he tries to make it interesting to us too by talking about places that we know—Siliguri, Chowrasta, Tungsung—not just those strange village names somewhere out there in the *pahar* (N; literally "hills", a Darjeeling colloquialism that refers to rural Nepal in general, as described in Chapter 2) where we've never been." I suddenly realized that I needed to listen more carefully. The seemingly familiar cadence of the *paloke* had lulled me into complacency, and I had forgotten to focus on the specifics of what Latte Apa was saying. In fact, he was entering new territory, by expanding the origin story narrative to encompass the Darjeeling migrations. Instead of leaving off in Dolakha, where Rana Bahadur's rendition presented above ended, Latte Apa's *paloke* incorporated the place names that Thangmi migrants from Nepal to India encountered on their long journey. As Latte Apa brought the narrative right up to the doorstep of the house in which we were sitting, I began to understand how he was ritualizing the process of migration and turning it into an integral part of the origin myth itself.

Latte Apa's *paloke* in practice shows how origin myths may do more than describing "creation" at a fixed moment sometime in the mythic past, but may themselves be creative forms that incorporate the ongoing process of migration as part and parcel of their narrative. Latte Apa's extension of the ritual chants to include the process of

migration to Darjeeling worked to make young Thangmi in India, like Ajay, feel included in the practice of Thangmi ritual, by ritually transforming familiar local places into Thangmi territory, rather than simply limiting it to an area of rural Nepal which was alien to young Thangmi in India like Ajay. In this process, deities were ritually “deterritorialized” from their abodes in Nepal, and “reterritorialized” not just in India, but in a transcendent conception of Thangmi territory.<sup>28</sup>

### *A Landscape of Deities and Ancestors*

At first, Latte Apa’s capacity to do this seemed novel and specific to his role as senior guru in the “diasporic” context of Darjeeling. On further reflection and analysis of my ethnographic materials from Nepal, however, it became clear that such conceptualizations of divine territory as at once immanent and transcendent were in fact a feature of Thangmi worldviews there as well. The world of Thangmi divinity seemed to mirror the tension between fixed residence and movement that characterizes the world of Thangmi humans. Or was it the other way around?

There has been much scholarly discussion in Tibetan and Himalayan Studies about the link between territory and identity as reflected in the worship of territorial deities (Blondeau and Steinkellner

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<sup>28</sup> These terms originate in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1977). Here, however, I use them to suggest not “a weakening of the link between culture and place” (Inda and Rosaldo 2002) but rather an expansion of such links to new locations.

1996; Ramble 1997; Blondeau 1998; Huber 1999a, 1999b; Buffetrille and Diemberger 2002; Tautscher 2007). In short, in a paradigm widely attested across the Tibetan cultural zone as it extends into the Himalayas, group identity is linked most closely to attachment to particular territories, which are personified by deities (Ramble 1997). These deities and their whims control the agricultural productivity of the land, as well as the fates of the people who work it. In many areas, such deities are linked to sacred mountains, and although this is not always the case in the Thangmi context, Thangmi territorial deities otherwise fit the model. Scholars of Himalayan Hinduism have described a seemingly similar paradigm in the cults of *kul deuta* (N), lineage deities identified with individual clans (Gaborieau 1968, Chalier-Visuvalingam 2003; Michaels 2004). From Nepal's elite Rana family downwards, every family has its own *kul deuta*, who resides in a specific location and must be propitiated on a regular schedule to assure good luck for the family.

Such territorial and lineage deity traditions are also the central feature of the Thangmi divine world, and in fact the two types of practice are conflated in the worship of the single deity of Bhume.<sup>29</sup> As in the song which serves as the epigraph to this chapter, Bhume is commonly referred to both as *mul deva* (T)—the chief territorial deity—

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<sup>29</sup> *Bhume* or *bhumi* is a Sanskrit term meaning earth, which is used in every day contemporary Nepali discourse to mean "soil" or "ground". Throughout South Asia, *bhumiputra*, meaning "sons of the soil", has been used as an epithet by ethno-nationalist parties. In the Thangmi context, no such usage of the term has yet been suggested.

and *kul deva* (T)—a lineage deity.<sup>30</sup> Bhume is in fact a pan-Himalayan earth deity, whose worship is a cornerstone of shamanic practice for many ethnic groups, and is not in any objective sense unique to the Thangmi.<sup>31</sup> However, Thangmi conceptualize the ritual practices through which they propitiate Bhume as evidence of their special relationship with the deity in its particular instantiation within Thangmi territory.<sup>32</sup> Other lineage deities (*kul deva*) attached to specific households (see Chapter 4) are all under Bhume's dominion, and include Bahradeva, Biswakarma, Chyurkun, Gatte, Golduk, Gosai and Sundrawati.

In a brief but illuminating article on Bhume in the Gulmi district of western Nepal, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine suggests that Bhume unites in a single divine entity what she calls the “tribal” notion of territoriality, and the Hindu “Indo-Nepalese” notion of lineage, as key markers of group cohesion and power (1993). In Gulmi, she attributes this mixture to the process of co-habitation between Magar and caste Hindu settlers in the area, in which Bhume provided a symbolic affirmation of both groups' claims to territory and power at once: the Magar claimed rights as propitiators of Bhume's territorial aspects,

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<sup>30</sup> *Deva* is the Thangmi language equivalent to the Nepali *deuta*.

<sup>31</sup> Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (1993) describes the worship of Bhume among the Magar, based on research in Gulmi as well as an earlier article by Marc Gaborieau (1968). She also alludes to personal communication from Corneille Jest, who asserts similar practices among Tamang.

<sup>32</sup> Since as described above, *bhume* simply means “earth” and comes from the archaic Sanskrit, there is no reason to assume that deities called by the same name by different Himalayan/South Asian ethnic groups should have similar characteristics, a shared history, or indicate close affinities between the groups who worship them.

while the caste Hindus claimed rights as propitiators of its lineage aspects. Bhume seems to play a similar role within the Thangmi context, except for the fact that, unlike in Gulmi, in Thangmi areas non-Thangmi do not participate directly in the deity's worship at all—except to receive consecrated offerings from a Thangmi officiant.<sup>33</sup> As we shall see below, the worship of Bhume is a mode of asserting Thangmi ritual control over the specific domain conceptualized as Thangmi territory, and therefore asserting the power of Thangmi identity itself.

### *Have Bhume, Will Travel*

“As they walked and walked from Simraungadh, Ya’apa and Sunari Ama brought Bhume with them,” said Guru Maila of Suspa to explain this most important divinity’s peripatetic tendencies.<sup>34</sup> Bhume is both integrally attached to the land where the Thangmi settle, and eminently transportable when they move. Having made the journey from Simraungadh with the ancestral Thangmi couple, Bhume is for the moment moored to the site of Thangmi settlement near Rangathali, in present day Suspa–Kshamawati VDC, Dolakha. As a song written by a Suspa youth group proudly broadcasts, “Bhume stayed here in our

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<sup>33</sup> In addition, the Thangmi Bhume is a non-gendered, non-anthropomorphic deity, while the Magar Bhume that Lecomte-Tilouine describes is imagined as a female deity similar to the Hindu earth goddess (1993: 128).

<sup>34</sup> Original Nepali: *Simraungadh bata hirdai hirdai Ya’apa ra Sunari Amale bhume liera ayo.*

village of Suspa, here in Rangathali where our ancestors settled.”<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, the most important communal Thangmi propitiation ritual in Nepal is Bhume Jatra, held annually at the Suspa Bhumethan temple near Rangathali on the full moon of Buddha Jayanti, the birthday of the Buddha.<sup>36</sup>

The timing may be simply a coincidence, since Buddha Jayanti falls in late April or early May around the time of the spring planting season, when Bhume’s beneficence is most needed. However, there is also a perceived resonance between the primary role that Bhume plays in the Thangmi ritual world and that of the Buddha for their Buddhist neighbors. Guru Maila articulated the difference between the Thangmi and the Tamang with the statement: “We worship Bhume, they worship Buddha.”<sup>37</sup> This simple summation also suggests how, in recent years, many Thangmi have sought to express their own complex of practice and belief in politically recognizable terms that situate it relationally vis-à-vis the “great traditions”. For instance, as enumerators for the 2001 Nepal census began to visit Thangmi villages, activists organized a series of meetings to determine how Thangmi should respond to census questions about religion. Although no consensus was reached, many of the gurus present argued for “Bhume *dharma*”—the religion, or way, of Bhume—as the most accurate representation of their practice, which

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<sup>35</sup> Original Nepali: *Hamro Suspa gauma hai hai bhume baseko yahanai purkha basne Rangathalima.*

<sup>36</sup> The suffix *-than* means “locality” or “place”, but has the sense of a sacred abode; “Bhumethan” is therefore “the sacred abode of Bhume”.

<sup>37</sup> Original Nepali: *Hamile bhume manyo, uniharule buddha manyo.*

maintained Thangmi uniqueness instead of collapsing them into the existing census categories of Buddhist, Hindu, or Kirant religion.<sup>38</sup> In inter-ethnic political meetings at NEFIN, I often heard Thangmi activists compare Bhume to Buddha or Brahma, despite the fact that Bhume is not an anthropomorphic divinity with human-like characteristics, but a black rock.

Located inside the house of Bhume's chief priest, or *pujari* (N), that black rock embodies both the essence of the earth, and the essence of Thangminess.<sup>39</sup> However, the Suspa rock is not unique. Instead, it is infinitely replicable wherever the Thangmi go. Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts have long been peppered with minor Bhumethan in which the deity can be worshipped by those too far away to make it to Suspa, and more recently, new Bhumethan have been established in Jhapa and Darjeeling, as will be described in detail below. As one man who had relocated from Lapilang to Jhapa explained, "After we built our Bhume temple, we thought, 'we can really stay here permanently'".<sup>40</sup> Suspa remains the Thangmi Bhume's chief abode, and propitiation rituals conducted elsewhere must always make reference to the Suspa Bhume. But as an all-pervasive earth deity present in every natural site, there is in fact nowhere that is *not*

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<sup>38</sup> The arguments of those activists who advocate accession to the category of "Kirant religion" are described in Chapters 3 and 5.

<sup>39</sup> Like the term *guru*, the term *pujari* is hereafter represented without italics for ease of reading due to its frequent appearance in the text.

<sup>40</sup> Original Nepali: *Bhume mandir banaera hami pakka yaha nai basna sakchau bhanera sojeko*.

Bhume's abode. Therefore it can be propitiated in any place that willing Thangmi reside.

This divine flexibility—the capacity to simultaneously sacralize a particular piece of earth, and to be present everywhere—and the “transcendentalization” of territory that it enables, accounts in part for the resilience of Thangmi identity within a context of high mobility. Bhume's enduring presence in Suspa creates a focal point around which the concept of Thangmi territory can be constructed as a source of a distinct identity, but at the same time, the very divine entity that gives this territory its symbolic power is infinitely expandable, manifesting in multiple natural sites wherever the people who believe in it recognize its presence. The territory claimed by contemporary activists in Nepal as Thangmi *kipat* in political terms, as marked by Bhume's chief temple in Suspa at its center, is in ritual terms only a temporary holding pen for practices which can go anywhere the Thangmi go. Bhume itself came from somewhere else with Ya'apa and Sunari Ama, and although installed in Suspa for at least 500 years—an adequate time span for the surrounding communities to develop an attachment and accord interpretive importance to its current location—the deity's continued residence there is a matter of tradition, not primordial necessity.<sup>41</sup> For Thangmi in India, this interpretation of Bhume's territoriality is key: its current location in Suspa is seen as a

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<sup>41</sup> As noted above, the earliest inscription dates the Thangmi settlement of the area to the 16th century; Thangmi gurus familiar with that chronology date the arrival of Bhume to that time, if not earlier.



chance resting place for both the deity and the people, a location determined by the contingencies of history, not by an essential, unshakeable link between territory–divinity–identity.

The diverse practices through which Bhume is propitiated, remain, however, an enduring means of reproducing Thangminess, both in Nepal and India. Performances and other objectifications in which the deity and its current location is refigured as an iconic symbol of Thangmi identity are also part of this process. Like Bhume, Thangmi identity is everywhere and nowhere at once, linked to a notion of sacred territory that transcends the geographical physicality of its location. Expressed in ritualized action at a range of locations, and in communication between the people who move regularly between those places, the whole of Thangminess is comprised of the links between these practices, people and movements, and their references to each other. To show what I mean, I present below a set of vignettes that demonstrate the range of ritualized actions through which Bhume plays centrally in the production of Thangmi identity: propitiation, performance, and pilgrimage.

*Private Propitiations: Bhume as Lineage Deity*

One warm May evening in 2000, I left my host family's house in Balasode to spend the night in the hamlet of Arkapole observing the annual Bhume propitiation ritual at the home of Birka Bahadur, the pujari of the Suspa Bhumethan. During the 40 minute walk along the

uphill grade of the new agricultural road which runs through Suspa's scattered hamlets, I considered how the uneven distribution of ritual responsibilities among the village's households might indicate the vestigial remains of a once-elaborate system of clan-based territorial deity worship. Gurus and lay Thangmi both routinely asserted to me that each family had its own *kul deva*, determined by their clan affiliation, and that the propitiation rituals for each such lineage deity were very specific and maintained only by the relevant families. However, the reality that I observed in practice was that for the most part, propitiation rituals for each of the lineage deities looked and felt exactly the same. In many cases the household members commissioning the ritual had to ask the guru which deity was their own *kul deva*.

Bhume was different, however, in the sense that everyone knew that there were only two families who could count this most important god of the earth, to whom all other deities were secondary, as their personal lineage deity. Only these two families had Bhume shrines within their own homes—built around black rocks that served as symbolic markers of Bhume's all-encompassing presence—and only the men of those two families were authorized to play the role of officiant in Bhume's annual propitiation ritual. The brothers Birka Bahadur and Dhan Bahadur in Arkapole were the incumbents of one family, while Subha Bahadur in Lisapotok represented the other.

This was both a traditional right which these men proudly asserted as exclusive to their families, and a major responsibility which required significant outlays of money and time. Each priestly family had to provide on an annual basis a minimum of five chickens for sacrifice, 12 eggs, a *mana* of oil, and substantial quantities of various grains with which to make effigies. In addition, they had to commit several days and nights (since most of the ritual episodes begin after sundown and typically take all night to complete) of their own time to overseeing the ritual process, during which their own houses were transformed into communal ritual spaces.

These two households were believed to represent, in metonymic fashion, the “original” 18 Thangmi houses of Suspa. As Birka Bahadur explained:

Our family has been doing this for at least seven generations. We are the only ones who can trace our lineage directly back to the time of Yapati Chuku and Sunari Aji, and since Bhume came with them, we must continue to honor the deity in our houses. In the past, the ritual was done in all 18 houses, but now only ours are left so we must do it here as if we are doing it in all 18.<sup>42</sup>

Neither the fate of the other 16 houses nor the significance of the number 18 is entirely clear, especially since the origin myth otherwise describes seven brothers and seven sisters. We may recall, though, that the first episode of Rana Bahadur’s narrative (as presented in Chapter 3) casts the Thangmi as the last of 18 ethnic groups to receive their language. Furthermore, Alexander Macdonald describes

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<sup>42</sup> Gurus and elders in other villages such as Alampu and Lapilang also assert that there were 18 original houses in their villages where Bhume should be propitiated.

how in Tamang and Sherpa mythology, there are believed to be 18 “pure” human lineages (1975: 202). The invocation of these original 18 houses—which perhaps represent 18 lineages—in reference to Bhume’s propitiation suggests that this practice is a powerful symbolic means of asserting Thangmi claims to territory by demonstrating the special relationship between the Thangmi lineages and the area’s chief territorial deity.

Since Bhume embodies the entire earth, its propitiation also entails calling upon the subsidiary territorial lineage deities, who are all in a sense Bhume’s deputies. In fact, the first part of Bhume’s annual propitiation ritual, as conducted in the pujari’s house before the officiants move to the Bhumethan itself, is identical to that for propitiating the minor lineage deities (such as Bahradeva, Sundrawati and Cyurkun) as and when families require such rituals to ensure good luck for their households. For this reason, in the interest of space I include only a single description of a propitiation ritual at the pujari’s house on Bhume Jatra, from which the ritual sequence and mechanisms of lineage deity propitiation can also be understood. However, the scope of the rituals are different: maintaining the patronage of one’s own lineage deity ensures good luck for one’s own family, while remaining in Bhume’s good graces is essential for the ongoing success of the Thangmi community as a whole.

The pujari’s household ritual began late in the afternoon two days before Buddha Jayanti, when Bhume would be publicly celebrated

by thousands of villagers at the Bhumethan temple near Rangathali.<sup>43</sup> Birka Bahadur's house was about an hour's walk from the temple site, where the following evening he would wash and adorn the black rock in festival finery in order to prepare the deity for the coming day's mass worship. But before all this, Birka Bahadur himself had to be empowered to perform his duties as Bhume's priest, and his own house consecrated. Both of these objectives would be achieved with the help of several guru, who would propitiate all of their lineage deities in Birka Bahadur's home, requesting their support for a successful Bhume puja.

As I arrived at the pujari's house just before 6pm, ritual preparations were already underway. A wooden platform was suspended from the ceiling in the middle of the room. From the bottom of the platform hung three strings of silver dollar-like dried leaves called *baldane* in Thangmi (N: *totala*; *oroxyllum indicum* – Latin),<sup>44</sup> which are a definitive feature of Thangmi ritual events. At the bottom of each string of four leaves was tied a bunch of fragrant *uirengpati* leaves used as incense. To the right of the platform sat the big conical piece of black rock, about 1.5 feet high, that was this household's personal piece of Bhume's presence, in fact the resting place of the *mul deva* itself: the "original" Bhume said to have been

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<sup>43</sup> This ritual description is based on events I observed between May 16–18, 2000.

<sup>44</sup> See Turin (2006: 711). *Baldane* becomes *bandalek* in the Sindhupalchok dialect of Thangmi, and the latter term is also heard frequently.

carried by Yapati Chuku and Sunari Aji. My research assistant Bir Bahadur offered his interpretation of this assertion:

Although people say that Ya'apa and Sunari Ama brought this rock with them, what they really mean is that they worshipped Bhume throughout their journey by propitiating the deity everywhere they went. Then, upon settling in Suspa, they said, "Now we will make this our Bhume", so that others could also worship the deity and that responsibility was no longer theirs alone. Then, once they passed away, people said, "Ya'apa and Sunari Ama brought this Bhume with them".

To the deity's left was a small metal dais atop which sat two smaller black rocks, also ringed by a necklace of coins. Above the whole setup, metal *trisul* (N), small tridents that serve as one of the deity's symbols, were suspended from the roof rafters.<sup>45</sup>

Earlier this afternoon, the pujari, who must fast for the duration of the ritual, had washed and purified the deity alone—no one else is allowed to observe this process. Now, Birka Bahadur doused the rock with water, then with milk, sandalwood-infused oil, and honey. Finally, he sprinkled it with *uirengpati* dipped in water, and adorned it in red and yellow powder, a necklace of coins, and silver "glasses" where the eyes might be imagined.

The pujari now sat in front of the brightly-colored rock fashioning a set of seven *thurmi* from the wood of the *uskul* tree (T; N: *kag balayo*). After scoring each peg on three sides and wrapping it in

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<sup>45</sup> The *trisul* is also the symbol of the Hindu deity Shiva, often known as Mahadev to the Thangmi. Indeed, Thangmi gurus often refer to the deity Mahadev, whom they equate with Bhume, in an example of the well-attested process in which local territorial deities come to be identified with specific Hindu or Buddhist deities (cf. Tautscher 2007).

white string, he reinforced each nail by hammering a small piece of iron vertically into it. He then placed four of these pegs at each corner of his house, one of them at the door, and one on each of the main paths leading to the front and back of the house. These *thurmi* serve to ritualize the every day space of the pujari's house as sacred and specifically Thangmi territory, providing a map for the deities who will be propitiated over the coming hours.

Birka Bahadur then turned to making *puchuk* (T), sacrificial effigies made of grain flour similar to the *torma* (Tib) found in Tibetan ritual practice. For Bhume, five *puchuk* of roasted wheat flour were required, but the number, material and style varied depended on the specific deity being propitiated and other conditions of the ritual. One *puchuk* in a simple conical shape had been completed and placed on a large *dumla* (T; N: *nibhara*) leaf in front of the deity, and the pujari was now making a second one in a more elaborate style. Called *takare* (T), this one had two branches at its top and was placed in the center of the leaf, with two simple ones surrounding it on either side. The pujari explained that the branched effigy held the power of the deities controlled by Thangmi gurus, while the simple ones on either side represented *lamako deva* and *bamriko deva*—the deities of the Buddhist lama and the Hindu brahmin respectively. With both Buddhist and Hindu divine power subsumed by that of Thangmi territorial deities, the presence of this trio in every Thangmi propitiation ritual is one of the clearest material representations of Thangmi synthetic

subjectivity. The *takare* is treated with special reverence, placed at the center of the offering tray or leaf altar.

As the pujari carefully garnished the top of each *puchuk* with a bright orange marigold, Suspa's three active senior gurus and their personal assistants walked through the door. Junkiri, whose name meant "firefly" in Nepali, was the oldest at around 70. Only Rana Bahadur was his senior, and the two were arch-rivals. Since Rana Bahadur was now too frail to make it through the all night ritual and stayed home, Junkiri was the unchallenged chief guru.<sup>46</sup> Panchaman was around 60, but despite his ritual competence, he had never had the charisma required to claim a devoted following, and was already being eclipsed in popularity by the decade-younger Guru Maila. Each guru represented a different hamlet and administrative ward within Suspa. Bhume Jatra was the chief occasion at which they met each year, and as they each showed their skill in propitiating and placating the deities, the event served as an opportunity for them to assert their personal power in public. There was an unspoken understanding that whichever guru demonstrated the greatest power at today's event would be vested with the authority to settle any disputes related to cultural practice or other traditional domains, including land rights, that might arise within the local Thangmi community over the coming year.<sup>47</sup> This prize seemed to be driving the competitive posturing and

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<sup>46</sup> Due to my own close relationship with Rana Bahadur, I could never get to know Junkiri well on a personal level. My interactions with him were limited to public events like this one, since he repeatedly evaded my requests for personal interviews.

<sup>47</sup> This authority did not extend to the Thangmi community in India.



one-upmanship in the gurus' movements as they checked the tautness of their drums and unpacked their bags full of ritual implements: *thurmi*, *mirkang* (T: tiger bone trumpet) and necklaces made of bells and snake vertebrae.

As the pujari lit a small oil lamp on the high altar in front of the mul deva, his helpers poured a bowl of homemade millet beer (T: *tong*) for each guru. *Tong* is the fuel of most Thangmi rituals, providing not just a pleasant alcoholic buzz, but stomach-filling nourishment that keeps the gurus and other participants going all night. The pujari lit a second lamp on the lower altar, and inserted a stick of incense into each *puchuk*. He then placed two eggs on small leaves on either side of the lamp.

The pre-ritual tension grew as the gurus slowly shook their aluminum bowls of beer to bring the settled bits of fermented grain to the top, polished their drum handles, and brought the audience's anticipation to a fevered pitch by delaying the start of the ritual for almost an hour after their arrival. About 40 people were crammed into the single ground-floor room of the pujari's house, bended knees and elbows tucked into every conceivable nook and cranny, and as the alcohol circulated they began clamoring for the gurus to begin the ritual chants that would bring the deities into the human world.

Just before 11pm, each guru took hold of a *baldane* leaf in his right hand, closed his eyes, and began chanting. The pujari lit the incense stuck into the *puchuk*, and smoke swirled through the room.

The first part of the propitiation ritual, called *sagun totko* (T: the consecration of the alcohol) proceeded with the following chant.

With sacred water move the unmoved, with sacred earth move the unmoved, with the household's mother deity, move what has remained unmoved by the nearby star [Venus] above the rooftop beam, with stalks of dry wheat move the unmoved, with the leaf of the brown oak move the unmoved, with the deity of the four-cornered door, move the unmoved.<sup>48</sup>

With all the bamboo strips used to tie the house beams together, move the unmoved, being of the high places ... beings of the low places, with the incense of the *sal* tree, move the unmoved, with incense move the unmoved, beings of the middle places, with the *nana* leaf...

Now our assistants must move the unmoved, Parmesvara, with the small and large *baldane* move the unmoved.<sup>49</sup> With the places we have constructed for the deities on the floor and on the leaves, move the unmoved. With offerings of unhusked rice move the unmoved.

Oh Parmesvari, move the unmoved. Move the unmoved. Now these deities, Bhume, Jalesvar, Kasesvar, Bisuni, Bisvakarma, oh Parmesvara, these deities which came from Simanghat and Kumanghat.<sup>50</sup>

The deity of our necklaces, the deity of our drums, the deity of the *baldane* tree, all of these deities, move the unmoved. You gods who have come from Thimi, this deity of the large *baldane*, deity of the small *baldane*, oh Parmesvara, the Mai deity of the deep place. The deity of the *bampa* [the tall wind-blocking stone described in Chapter 4], Cyurkun Macha deity, Gorkha Macha deity, Yankate deity, the deity of the livestock shed, stay here under Parmesvara's protection.

After about half an hour of repeating these refrains, the gurus took a break for beer and cigarettes. The deities had been called into attendance, and it was now time to move on to the *deva paloke*. These

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<sup>48</sup> Here I have translated the deity's names that refer to objects or places, but left intact those that are untranslatable proper names.

<sup>49</sup> Parmesvara, Parmesvari, and Parmesvar are all epithets for the Hindu deity Shiva, but they literally mean "Supreme God" in Sanskrit, and here refer to Bhume.

<sup>50</sup> Simanghat is another pronunciation of Simraungadh. Kumangat refers to Kumraungadh, another Tarai town close to Simraungadh.

chants remind the deities of their divine responsibilities, and the humans of how they came to be who, what and where they are.

The gurus slowly draped necklaces of metal bells and snake vertebrae over their shoulders and turned to face the Bhume rock directly. Each guru took a sip from a container of water ritually purified with the *uirengpati* leaves proffered by the pujari, who then threw a handful of mustard seed into the fire burning in the hearth at the center of the room to purify the space. As smoke enveloped everyone again, Junkiri moved to the center of the room and dipped his hand into the fire, scooping up a handful of ash. He began singing a haunting melody alone as Panchaman blew his thigh bone trumpet and Guru Maila anointed himself with a *tika* (N: ritual marking on the forehead) of ash. The pujari then gave himself a *tika* of ash and sprinkled consecrated water on the Bhume rock, while the drone of the *mirkang* echoed through the room. Just before midnight, Guru Maila began to chant.

Move, move, while moving bring [the deities], hai, while moving [in all directions] bring [the deities]. Hai, the deities' congress is in session, what shall be done, how shall it be done? All the ritual items are also present, what shall be done, how shall we do it? Having said this, lau hai, now what is found all over the earth?

Barja guru went to Martelok to wander around and see what was there. I sent him to Martelok, and he found that there were no plants or jungle there. He found that there was no earth or forest there.

There were also no trees, also no water, they said. The deities said: what to do? how shall we do it? Saying this, Mahadev pulled some earwax out of his ear.<sup>51</sup>

The demon Madhukaite came into being from [Mahadev's] earwax.<sup>52</sup> [The deities] said: what shall be done? how shall it be done? This [demon] sat unmoving on the earth. [The deities] said: what shall be done? how shall it be done?

[The deities] said: let's kill him. Entering the water, [Mahadev] created Jalesvar, Kasesvar, Bisuni, and Bisvakarma deities. They also created a sword with a sharp blade. Lo, now let's kill the demon Madhukaite with the sword [they said]!

The demon's head became [the peaks of] Himalchuli and Gaura Parbat. His blood became the water. His flesh became the mud. His bones became the rocks. His fat became the sand.

La, now what is to be done? How shall it be done? said [the deities]. Lai, now there is still no sacred water. They said: go to Chukur Gumba and sit in meditation there for seven days and seven nights.<sup>53</sup>

What business have you come on, what kind of business have you come on? said [the lamas of Chukur Gumba]. You must give me sacred water, said [Barja Guru]. They gave him sacred water, they also sent him with hail stones, they sent all the sacred water.

They also sent hail stones. Now, what is to be done, how shall it be done? said [the deities]. With the sacred water lakes were also made. Bandu Pokhari also came into being, the *kali-kath* tree also came into being, it is said. Ragat Pokhari [Blood Lake] also came into being, Dudh Pokhari [Milk Lake] also came into being.

The deities said: Now what is to be done? How shall it be done? We've made all the sacred water, but now there remains no bushes or jungle, they said. Now with this sacred cow's dung ...make a small lake on Sumeru Parbat, make a small lake [the deities said to Barja Guru]. Covering [the lakes] with cow dung (N: *gobar*) for seven days and seven nights, on the seventh day [they] saw that bushes and jungle had appeared, seeds had also appeared. These were planted all over the earth.

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<sup>51</sup> Here the singular creator deity is known as both "Barja Guru" and "Mahadev". "Barja" has resonances with the "bajra/vajra" thunderbolt imagery of Mahayana Buddhism, while as described above, the second term has Hindu resonances: Mahadev is one of Shiva's manifestations. Thangmi gurus use the two names interchangeably.

<sup>52</sup> In some tellings this demon is called Markepapa instead of Madhukaite.

<sup>53</sup> *Gumba* is a variation on the Tibetan *gumpa*, which is usually translated as "monastery", although it literally means simply "place of meditation".

In the place where white leaves fell, white mud appeared. In the place where red leaves fell, red mud appeared. In the place where black leaves fell, black mud appeared.

The deities said: ahai, now what is to be done, how should it be done? Now all over the earth, everything has been made, they said...

Chanting, the deities said, 'Now what is to be done, how shall it be done?' and from the mountains to the plains they went playing the drum.

The deities said, we've also held the divine congress, we've also gathered all of the ritual items, we must create humankind. Shiva guru, Barma Guru and Vishnu guru sat together and made a gold [man] and a silver [man], but he did not speak...

From this point on, as humankind is created and differentiated along ethnic lines, Guru Maila's *paloke* chants more or less converge with those of Rana Bahadur as recounted in Chapter 3. The key theme to note here is that by killing the demon, the deities imbue the surrounding territory with evidence of their divine power: every rock, every bit of mud is a testament to the victory of deity over demon.<sup>54</sup> The ongoing presence of these deities is felt deeply by the Thangmi individuals who depend upon the land for their livelihoods—that is, the majority of Thangmi in Nepal. Propitiation rituals for Bhume and other lineage deities are crucial opportunities for the human community to demonstrate their loyalty to the divine powers within whose domain they live.

After chanting the entire *paloke*, which recounts the history of the Thangmi up until their settlement in Rangathali, Guru Maila and the others took an extended break. It was now after 1am, and the audience

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<sup>54</sup> This is a common mythic element across the Himalayas. I discuss this theme in greater detail in Chapter 7.

was beginning to yawn. They snapped to attention as the gurus signaled that they were about to begin the next ritual component, the *jokhana* (N: divination), essentially a ritual horoscope for the coming year. In lineage deity propitiations, the results of the *jokhana* apply only to the individual family in question, but during Bhume puja the predictions concern the entire Thangmi community. They are therefore of great importance, since any instructions that the deities might give for averting disaster must be carefully heeded by Thangmi everywhere.

As the gurus began to go into trance to channel the deities and receive their spiritual forecast for the year, everyone present crowded around closely so as to hear whatever pronouncements might be made. Junkiri's breathing was punctuated by increasingly sharp cries as his eyes rolled back in his head, and he shook with the force of possession as the deity entered him. The other gurus became similarly possessed, but Bhume chose to speak through Junkiri, whose seniority had clearly trumped the other two. For several minutes Junkiri emitted a series of unintelligible grunts and cries. Slowly the sounds began to shape into words, and a single phrase emerged, repeated over and over: "I have been tied".<sup>55</sup>

The pujari and the gurus' assistants looked perplexed. People pushed and shoved to get closer to Junkiri so they could hear the divine words themselves. "I've been tied, I've been tied," he moaned, his voice sometimes rising to an eerie wail. Everyone looked at each

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<sup>55</sup> Original Nepali: *Malai banneko*.

other, seeking some insight to make sense of this obtuse utterance. After about ten minutes of confusion, the pujari raised his eyebrows. “Eh heh ...” he said with the rising intonation of a question. “Bhume must be upset that we have built walls around its place of worship in Suspa. The god feels tied down, it cannot move.”

### *A Captive God*

The previous year, Gopal, a Thangmi schoolteacher in upper Suspa, and an active member of the then newly unified Nepal Thami Samaj, had launched a campaign to raise funds to build a temple building around the Bhumethan rock near Rangathali. This Bhume Jatra was the building’s inaugural year, the first time that the deity would be set apart from the outside world. With stone walls, wooden rafters, a yellow aluminum roof topped with a monastery-like steeple, and an elaborate wooden door, the new structure looked appropriately synthetic, with stylistic allusions to both Hindu and Buddhist Himalayan temple architecture (see Figures 6.3 and 6.4). Despite the temple’s hefty price-tag of over 500,000 rupees (approximately \$6280 at 2008 rates) and 742 days of villager-manpower, Bhume apparently remained unimpressed. However grand the temple built in its name was, the deity did not, it seemed, appreciate being walled in, or tied down, to its present location.

Junkiri’s *jokhana* gave voice—and not just any voice, but the voice of Bhume itself—to an existing sense of frustration among many

villagers about what had happened to the Bhumethan. Although some had agreed with Gopal's logic that spending money and time on such a structure showed their great devotion to the deity, and would also help



Figure 6.3 Birka Bahadur at the Suspa Bhumethan before the new building was erected, May 1999

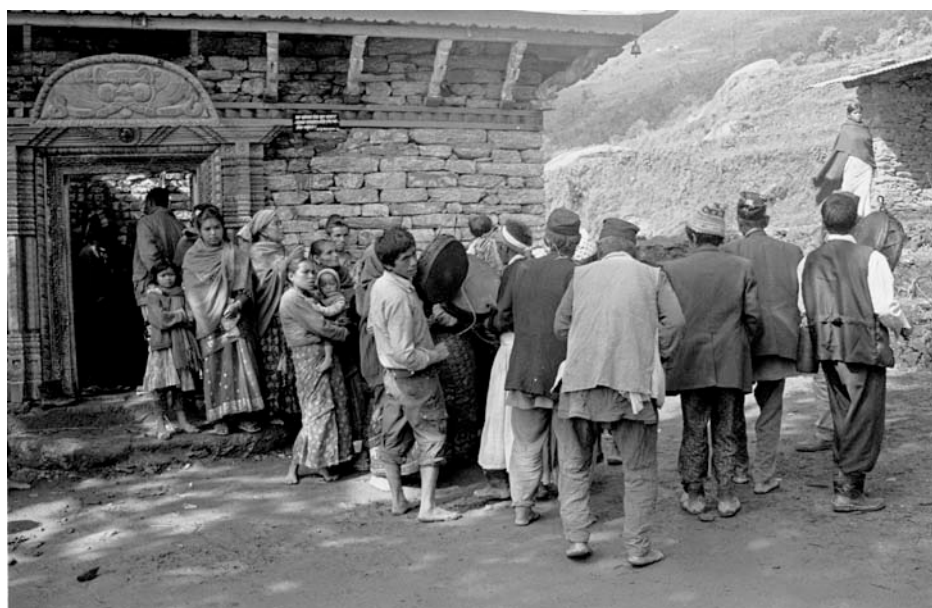


Figure 6.4 New Suspa Bhumethan temple building at its inauguration, May 2000



make the Thangmi practice of Bhume worship more recognizable to non-Thangmi observers, many Thangmi with whom I spoke felt that to enclose Bhume was to challenge the very source of the deity's power. After all, Thangmi came to make offerings to the rock itself, embedded in the earth, not icons or statues installed in a temple. My hostess in Balasode expressed her opinion on the matter as follows:

For us Thangmi, Bhume is part of the earth. We are different from Hindus and Buddhists because we do not need temples to know that Bhume is with us. Now the temple that they have built makes our Bhume small and makes it seem like any other Hindu deity. The walls separate us from Bhume. I do not want to go inside there now. That temple belongs to Gopal, not to Bhume or common Thangmi people like us.

Her statement suggests how building walls around Bhume set up a stark division between sacred and profane, which was at odds with the way in which many Thangmi conceptualized Bhume as at once part of the earth and part of themselves. To people who shared this view, the temple building seemed to aspire to Hindu mores, not to encourage Thangmi practice.<sup>56</sup>

When I asked Gopal about the rationale behind building the temple, he told me that the walls served to keep non-Thangmi out, since the Thangmi needed to act fast to protect Bhume against encroaching Hinduization. In his desire to preserve an exclusively Thangmi space, his logic appealed to the very exclusivity of Hinduism

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<sup>56</sup> Here it is worth recalling that Gopal, the organizer of the temple building project, was the same man who had authored the 1990 pamphlet cited in Chapter 5 which advocated a path to progress which entailed the disavowal of "wild" Thangmi practices in favor of a Hinduized modernity.

itself. The concept of barring outsiders had not previously been a feature of Thangmi practice, which had been conducted in outdoor environments open to all. The grain-flour *puchuk* effigies consecrated by Bhume during the course of the ritual had also always previously been distributed to local Bahuns and Chhetris as well, as a blessing from the territorial deity who controlled the land which they all inhabited. However, Thangmi gurus were the only people empowered to actually mediate the human relationship with the territory's chief deity. Thangmi had felt secure in their knowledge of the power generated by this exclusive relationship, and therefore saw no need for walls to protect Bhume. Putting them up was therefore a contested move among the local Thangmi community

Clearly, Bhume itself was not happy with this state of affairs and expressed those sentiments through Junkiri's *jokhana*. As the guru's trance subsided and he stopped shaking, whispers echoed across the room. People were discussing how to placate the angry deity. Some were upset that Bhume did not appreciate the great effort the community had invested in building the new temple as a sign of devotion. Others felt vindicated by the deity's protest and proposed a special propitiation ritual to apologize and ask the deity how the community could make good. Still others suggested that they simply needed to explain to Bhume that the temple building was a form of development, which would strengthen the position of the Thangmi

community vis-à-vis local caste-Hindu families, ultimately ensuring Bhume's position as the chief territorial deity of the region.

These deliberations soon gave way to the desire to conclude the ritual at hand. It was just after 4am, and a chicken was brought in for sacrifice. The pujari had raised the chicken for a full year especially for today's occasion, and once its blood had been sacrificially spilled, a new chicken would immediately be designated for next year's ritual. The pujari handed the chicken to Junkiri, who in one deft motion ripped off its head and sprayed its blood across the ritual altar in front of the gurus. Then, individuals had the opportunity to present their own chickens as offerings to the deities, and a long line of people clutching chickens quickly formed, stretching out through the door into the courtyard.

Finally, just after 6am, one of the gurus' assistants removed the bamboo tray full of *puchuk* effigies from the room. Several of them were splattered with blood. Walking away from the house, he crossed the nearest small stream and broke the *puchuk* into small pieces. He returned one piece to the pujari's house, where the pujari must consume the consecrated offering, before anyone else may touch it. The guru's assistant then found a child to take another piece of the *puchuk* across the river as an offering to the families there of all ethnic affiliations. Finally, he distributed additional *puchuk* pieces to the assembled audience in the immediate area of the pujari's house. The preliminaries to the Bhume ritual conducted at the pujari's house had

now come to an end, and everyone returned home to sleep for much of the day before arriving at the Bhumethan itself for the main event later.

### *Bhume as Cultural Performance*

While the gurus slept, a mass of villagers of all ages were gathering at the Bhumethan for an afternoon “cultural performance” (N: *sanskritik karyakram*) put on by Suspa’s youth in honor of Bhume Jatra.<sup>57</sup> A big red welcome banner hung over the main entrance to the new temple enclosure. Tenuous electricity lines ran down to the temple from village houses up the hill in the hopes of illuminating a sea of tiny lights draped over the temple as darkness fell.

While waiting for the gurus to arrive at the pujari’s house the night before, I had ventured next door to watch a village youth group rehearsing songs for this event. The leader of the group was Gopi, the pujari’s teenage son, who had written several songs in the Thangmi language, including one entitled “Yapati Chuku and Sunari Aji” which set the portion of the origin myth about the ancestral couple to music. The performance group’s inspiration came in large part from Darjeeling, in the form of the *Amako Ashis* cassette recorded there the previous year, which had been billed as “the first Thangmi language

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<sup>57</sup> Monica Mottin’s PhD in progress on “The Politics of Performance in Nepal” (SOAS) shows how the category of “cultural performance” put on by “cultural groups” (N: *sanskritik samuha*) emerged as a nationalist form of expression promoted by the Nepali state during the panchayat era.

cassette” and was received with great interest as it made its way to Dolakha with returning circular migrants.

When I dropped into their rehearsal session, the young members of the group were busy editing lyrics scratched out in the margins of old newspapers and trying out different rhythms on the *madal*, the long, narrow two-sided drum that is at the center of musical traditions all over village Nepal.<sup>58</sup> When I asked whether they were ready for their upcoming performance, Gopi laughed nervously and confided that it was going to be the group’s debut, and in fact the first time anything of the sort had been performed as part of Bhume Jatra.

While Birka Bahadur enacted Bhume’s ritual practice inside the Bhumethan, then, his son was at the forefront of the performance tradition developing outside the temple. As the pujari’s oldest son, Gopi was next in line to take on the responsibilities of Bhume’s annual propitiation. Instead of observing his father’s careful ritual preparations so as to learn the practice himself, however, Gopi was crafting performances that objectified his father’s practice and translated it into catchy musical refrains more accessible to a broad range of listeners. The pujari himself was not displeased with this state of affairs, taking great pride in Gopi’s performance and leadership abilities. The difference between father and son’s relationships with

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<sup>58</sup> As with other objects like the ritual dagger and the shaman’s drum, the *madal* is not uniquely Thangmi, yet they claim it as an identity marker. As described in Chapter 5, it is at the center of the NTS logo, and Rana Bahadur once told me that there was a particular rhythm on the *madal* which would make only Thangmi go into trance.

Bhume seemed to indicate the diversification that Thangmi cultural production was undergoing. Here in Suspa, as in Darjeeling, practices were increasingly becoming performatized, as explained in Chapter 2.

The new enclosure around the Bhumethan was also part of this transformation. The building introduced a stark separation between the space for ritual practice—which would by necessity be conducted inside now, in a clearly delimited Thangmi-only space in close proximity to Bhume itself, as embodied in the black rock—and the space for cultural performance, which would take place outside in a public, inter-ethnic environment. Perhaps effecting this separation between practice and performance was part of the intended objective of the temple building project in the minds of activists like Gopal. By shifting practice—the actual propitiation of the deity by the gurus—to a behind-the-scenes space inside the temple that was essentially hidden from public view, the activists could reorient public attention to the realm of cultural performance, over which they themselves maintained tacit control. Khumbalal, the senior activist who, as cited in Chapter 3, had written passionately about the need to wrest control of Thangmi culture from the gurus, had traveled from Kathmandu to attend this inaugural Bhume Jatra at the new temple. Along with other NTS activists, such as Megh Raj, he sat in the audience for the afternoon's cultural performance.

Now, at around 3pm on the afternoon of Bhume Jatra, Gopal began the cultural program with an amplified welcome to all who were

gathered there. Approximately 800 villagers crowded around a large rock at the base of the temple, where the oldest deity of the area—even pre-dating Bhume—was believed to reside. Gopi's group performed several song and dance numbers in the Thangmi language on a wooden stage, with the aid of the erratically functioning microphone. Then several students from the local high school performed another dance to a Nepali pop tune, and several students read out poetry they had composed for the occasion. Between each item, Gopal made sure to ask for additional donations to cover the remaining costs of the new building. Several NGOs working in the district made announcements about their current projects, and then political leaders from the main parties took their turns, along with Maoist guerrillas, who were present in civilian dress.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, the program began to wind down as dusk fell. Just when people were beginning to stray to the edges of the Bhumethan area and break into small conversation groups, the sound of the gurus' drums began to echo across the hills, getting closer and closer. They were working their way up the hill from the pujari's house, where they had reconvened to have a drink, preparing to make an entrance that would remind the festival-goers that ritual power could not be expressed in its entirety through performance alone.

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<sup>59</sup> See Shneiderman and Turin (2004) for a discussion of their presence in Dolakha at that time.

*Public Propitiations: Bhume as Territorial Deity*

Heralded by an assistant carrying a white flag draped with garlands of *baldane* and the rhythmic beat of their drums, eight gurus cut through the crowd shortly after 8pm. Each guru was wearing a different brightly-colored cotton shirt in jewel hues of green, blue, red and purple, and a long white cotton skirt. Birka Bahadur, the pujari at whose house I had spent the previous night, accompanied the gurus. He carried a box of ornaments passed down through his family's lineage, with which he would adorn the Bhume rock while the gurus demanded the deity's attention. His assistant carried a cane tray overflowing with offerings: several small oil lamps; a *takare puchuk* made of wheat flour; one *puchuk* made of rice flour; a leaf plate full of a paste made from cooked rice; a leaf plate full of honey; one *mana* of homemade mustard oil; a metal jug of water consecrated with *uirengpati* leaves; and a metal censer filled with burning *uirengpati* incense. The bearer of these offerings had to walk carefully, since the oil lamps had to be kept alight; a dying flame would mean that Bhume was angry.

First the group stopped at the house of Santa Bahadur, the pujari of upper Suspa. His house was located just below the large rock at the base of the Bhumethan, and was believed to be the other remaining house of the original 18. Santa Bahadur placed *baldane* atop each of 18 *puchuk* that he had made. This pujari then joined the procession as well, as the gurus danced their way towards the Bhumethan itself.



The gurus stopped outside the gate of the temple building to give Bhume one last warning of their impending visit. As they had at several points on the path between lower and upper Suspa where minor deities were believed to reside, here the gurus sang of their journey and called the deities to attention with the beat of their drums. While the gurus held the audience's attention outside the temple, the pujaris went inside to begin preparing the deity for worship.<sup>60</sup>

First the two pujaris washed the deity with water consecrated with *uirengpati*. Then they mixed some of this water with the rice paste brought from Birkha Bahadur's house to make a liquid which they called "milk", and washed the black rock with the mixture. Next they doused the deity in honey before dressing it in the antique ornaments that Birka Bahadur had carried: a set of silver glasses, a silver crown, and several necklaces made of old coins from India.<sup>61</sup> They placed flower garlands around its "head" and sprinkled handfuls of red powder on it. By now the only items left in the ornament box were three small silver umbrellas, which Birka Bahadur carefully unfolded, displayed before the deity for inspection, and then placed in front of the rock where Bhume could "see" them. Finally, the pujaris lit a new batch of incense and waved the censer around the temple. Once the

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<sup>60</sup> Since the temple building carried a prohibition against non-Thangmi entering, I was unable to observe events that went on inside the building. The following paragraphs are based upon the pujaris' and gurus' description of what they did during this specific ritual event as elicited the following day.

<sup>61</sup> Some of these coins, like those of necklaces worn by many Thangmi women, date to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and are said to have been brought back to Nepal by early migrant laborers.

smell of *uirengpati* permeated the entire space, the two pujaris exited through the door and motioned to the gurus that everything was now prepared for their entrance.

While the gurus sang their way into the building, moving in a slow serpentine line to the beat of their drums, the pujaris walked to the foot of the big rock below the Bhumethan where the afternoon's cultural program had been held. Here lived the *tore deva* (T), the "old man" deity, who was thought to be the oldest deity in the area, predating even Bhume's arrival with Ya'apa and Sunari Ama. The pujaris offered red powder and betel nut to this old god, lit a fresh batch of incense in his honor, and chanted a few lines to reassure him that even if Bhume no longer resided here, they would continue to honor him. Later, Birka Bahadur told me that he had put extra effort into honoring the Tore Deva this year, since he was concerned that the stage for the cultural program might have been erected without an appropriate ritual to secure the deity's permission.

After the pujaris finished their work, they sat back on their haunches with lit cigarettes to join the rest of the crowd in listening to the grand finale inside the temple. "Listen" is the key word: since few people could fit inside the temple building, most of the attendees could only hear what was going on rather than seeing it themselves as they had in the past. Murmurs of discontent about this state of affairs rumbled through the crowd, but many of the onlookers were too drunk to worry and began dancing themselves in the absence of visual access

to the gurus' practice. Much of the crowd dissipated soon after the gurus entered the temple; there was no longer anything to see and it was getting towards midnight, so the revelers made their way home.

Once inside the temple, the gurus placed the 18 *puchuk* in front of the deity, along with metal jug full of *tong* topped with five *baldane* leaves. As their assistants lit a small offering fire atop a combination of unhusked rice, husked rice, buckwheat, and clarified butter, the gurus sat down in a row facing the deity and began to chant. First they consecrated the alcohol, and then called the deity into presence. These chants were almost identical to those of the previous night at the pujari's house, but here the only deity addressed was Bhume. The lineage deities who had been propitiated the previous night, and remained at attention now, had made it possible for the pujaris and gurus to arrive at the moment of Bhume's own propitiation without encountering obstacles along the way, and now Bhume itself was to be addressed.

Despite the personal attention, now Bhume did not "speak": none of the gurus went into trance as Junkiri had the night before. When reviewing the sequence of events with me the following day, Guru Maila suggested that Bhume may have chosen to speak out at the relatively private preliminary ritual at the pujari's house instead of at the public festival to avoid causing embarrassment, or worse, violence, at the larger event. As the gurus assured Bhume that they would protect its territory and make all of the necessary offerings over the

coming year, they took several breaks for *tong*, afterwards resuming their chants with a fresh burst of energy. Soon there was a hint of dawn in the sky. Junkiri tentatively peeked his head out of the temple door and gestured to a line of waiting villagers that they could hand over their chickens for sacrifice. This was no doubt the ritual climax for the hardy few who were still left standing in the hazy morning light. Junkiri collected over 20 chickens just outside the door of the temple, and motioned to the other gurus and their assistants to join them. At his command, they each picked up a chicken, and the living birds were quickly reduced to a pile of carcasses whose blood was sprayed in front of Bhume's image to demonstrate the community's commitment to their territorial deity.

Finally it was time to conclude the ritual, and the gurus began the chant to usher the deities back to their abodes. Once the deities had dispersed, one of the pujaris began removing Bhume's ornaments and returning them to their box, while the other lit five small lamps with string wicks laid out in a line in front of the rock. The gurus began to leave the building, continuing to beg leave from the deities as they exited. Following the gurus, the pujaris closed the temple door behind them and lit five more small lamps on the threshold outside the building to demonstrate to the deities that they could expect no further offerings this year. As the gurus descended down the hill, heading towards the pujari Birka Bahadur's house, they reminded the

deities to behave, since the offerings they had made should be adequate for the coming year.

Upon arriving at the pujari's house once more, the gurus immediately began investigating a bamboo tray where several *puchuk*, including the *takare*, had been left during the course of the ritual at the Bhumethan. They were all still intact, which was taken as a sign that the gurus' supplications were successful and the deity was not angry. The pujari rustled around in a basket at the corner of the room and produced five eggs, one of which was placed next to the *takare*, while four were placed on a ledge above it.

Now it was time to prepare the *graha* (N), a form of ritual exorcism that would remove any traces of illness-causing bad luck that might remain in the ritual space of the pujari's house, thereby metonymically purifying the entire Thami community. In a small open weave basket, the pujari arranged a leaf plate laden with corn kernels, unhusked rice, wheat, a single oil lamp, and nine one *paisa* coins. He then made one new *puchuk* out of wheat flour, and placed it on the floor in front of the *bampa* along with the single egg that had been placed next to the *takare*. In what Bir Bahadur joked was a game of "Thangmi football", the gurus took turns gently kicking this last *puchuk* and the egg out the door, taking pains to keep both intact. Carrying the tray holding the *takare*, the pujari then circled the fire once, and followed the gurus out the door. He picked up the "football" *puchuk* and egg and dumped them in the basket, then topped it off

with the original *puchuks* from the tray. Finally, the pujari pulled two small pieces of *uskul* wood out of his pocket, marked them with the fire poker, and stuck them on top of the now disintegrating *puchuk* in the basket. The assembled company followed the pujari down to the river below his house and watched him dump the contents of the basket in the water, thereby disposing of the *graha*.

It was now time to dismiss the minor lineage deities of the pujari's household, who had been standing guard throughout the entire Bhume puja since the moment they had been called into presence almost 48 hours ago. The pujari provided three more chickens, who were promptly dispatched as a final offering to Bhume's deputies. One tray of *puchuk* remained, and one of the eggs placed on the altar was cracked over them, while the others were fried in the fire and distributed to everyone present as a divine offering. The gurus began playing their drums again, telling the deities to leave the human realm until this time next year. With another small piece of *uskul* wood, the pujari broke off the tops of the remaining *puchuk*, and splattered chicken blood over them. Men began to line up in front of the pujari to receive a mark on their forehead of chicken blood and rice, while women received a mark of egg and rice. Each individual also received a small piece of the *puchuk* in his or her hand as a blessing from the deities.

Finally, the gurus began the concluding chant of the entire ritual event. Blessing three bowls full of alcohol and one *mana* of uncooked

rice topped with *banadalek* flowers, the gurus took leave from both the divine and human communities, asking to be released from their duties (towards Bhume at least) until the following year. Still singing, the chief guru Junkiri carried the chicken leg from the first day's sacrifices and walked out the door, followed by the other gurus, each carrying a paisa coin and a small oil lamp in their cupped hands. Out in the courtyard, they threw the coins and oil lamps on the ground and stamped them out with their feet. Bhume Jatra was over for the year, and everyone went inside to eat a feast of rice and chicken heads prepared by the pujari's wife.

*Marking Ethnic Territory: Bhume as Identity Icon and Pilgrimage Site*

The debate over the new temple building had subsided by the time Bhume Jatra rolled around the following year, in 2001. Those who had been opposed to the building began to accept its reality as part of their local landscape, and the deity appeared to have been placated by an additional set of propitiation rituals organized some months later. Gopal decided to capitalize on the building's apparent success and exploit its potential as a powerful political icon by using it as the site for a four day-long "national Thangmi conference" on the occasion of Bhume Jatra in 2001. With financial support from a Japanese INGO, Thangmi from all over Nepal and India were invited to gather in Suspa for Bhume Jatra. At least 20 gurus from across the Thangmi world participated, along with around 2000 laypeople. The objective of the

conference, as one participant told me, was to “discuss the differences between Thami culture in different areas and think about how to create a more unified culture”.<sup>62</sup>

For many Thangmi from India, as well as the most far-flung Thangmi settlements in Jhapa and Udayapur, the occasion was their first opportunity to actually see the site where the Bhume which they had heard so much about stood. Some of the participants from India took photos of the new Suspa Bhumethan building home with them, and by 2003 this photo graced the cover of *Niko Bachinte*, the first substantial publication of the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association (see Figure 6.5).

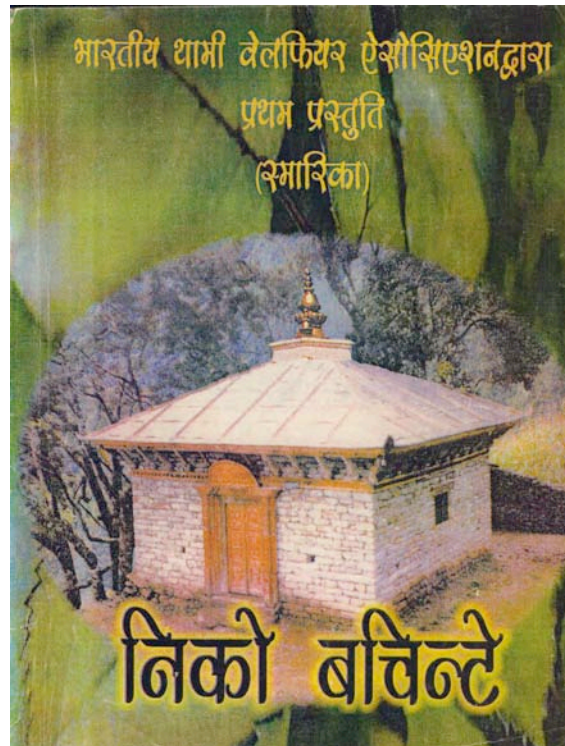


Figure 6.5 Photo of Suspa Bhumethan on the cover of *Niko Bachinte*

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<sup>62</sup> Further details of this conference are discussed in Chapter 5.



After appearing on the publication cover, the image began to pop up everywhere in Darjeeling: on poster-size photo prints adorning household walls, on invitations to BTWA events; and on certificates presented to participants in BTWA-organized cultural events. Despite the distaste with which many Thangmi in Nepal had originally viewed the temple building, its image quickly became iconic in India. It then circulated throughout the Thangmi public sphere, returning to Nepal in 2007 on the cover of *Reng Patangko*, the second Thangmi language music cassette, which was produced in Kathmandu.

The Bhumethan as shown on the cover of *Niko Bachinte* appeared to float in space, a free-standing architectural icon unmoored from its physical setting. There were no people or other contextualizing details to indicate the building's location in a rural hill village in Nepal. The caption for the photo, which is reproduced on the title page of the publication, read:

The Bhumethani in Suspa—the auspicious pilgrimage site of the Thami community. The 'Bhumeshwor' was set up there in unknown times by a historic couple from the Thami community, Yapati and Sunari, from Simraungadh. This temple is situated on an exciting hill in Suspa, to the northeast of Charikot, the district headquarters of Dolakha, from where it can be reached on foot in three hours. (Niko 2003: 1)

This paragraph captured several characteristics of the concept of Thangmi territory that was emerging in India. First of all, it valorized the locality in which the temple was situated without mentioning Nepal at all. Second of all, it emphasized the migration of the ancestors to this location from Simraungadh. Third of all, it presented the Suspa

Bhumethan as a pilgrimage site to which one traveled from afar, rather than as the abode of a local deity intimately involved in every day life.

The proposal to promote the Suspa Bhumethan as a Thangmi pilgrimage site had first been presented by Thangmi activists from both Jhapa and Darjeeling at the 2001 Bhume Jatra conference. Along with concurrent plans to build a new Bhume temple in Darjeeling, and renovate an existing one in Jhapa, conceptualizing the Suspa Bhumethan as a pilgrimage site was part of an effort to establish symbolic links between a set of Bhume temples to mark the contours of Thangmi ethnic territory, which was primarily imagined in translocal, rather than transnational, terms. The continuities between this set of places, each of which physically marked Bhume's presence, grounded an otherwise transcendent notion of both deity and territory in specific, ethnicized locations.<sup>63</sup>

The idea of pilgrimage was certainly not new to Thangmi in Nepal. Every year on the mid-summer full moon of the Nepali month of Bhadau (August–September), gurus and laypeople from all over the region made the arduous climb up to the 13,000 foot high summit of Kalinchok.<sup>64</sup> This peak straddled the district border between Dolakha

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<sup>63</sup> The relevant anthropological literature on pilgrimage is too immense to consider in detail here. While Turner (1974, 1978) provides the paradigmatic description of pilgrimage as a liminal experience with characteristics of an initiation rite, Coleman and Eade (2004) provide a useful overview of contemporary work in the field that complicates Turner's position. Some of these arguments are discussed in further detail below.

<sup>64</sup> Some Thangmi chose other pilgrimage sites on the same day; for instance, several gurus from the village of Alampu went to an alpine lake called Baula Pokhari, while others living in villages very close to the Tibetan border went instead to Deodhunga, a large rock on the old, largely defunct trading path between Dolakha and

and Sindhupalchok, and was believed to be the abode of Kali Mai. Although the summit of Kalinchok played an important role in the Thangmi origin story—as the point from which the seven brothers shot their arrows to determine their future places of residence—the peak was considered to be a boundary marker of the outside limits of Thangmi territory, not an integral part of it. Kali Mai was similarly not conceptualized as a particularly Thangmi deity in the same manner that Bhume was, and the pilgrimage to Kalinchok was an inter-ethnic affair, with devotees from Tamang, Kirant and caste Hindu groups participating in large numbers.<sup>65</sup> Gurus often told triumphant stories about winning competitions against shamans from other ethnic groups at Kalinchok, and the rare opportunity to assert their particularly Thangmi power in an inter-ethnic context seemed to be a large part of what motivated gurus to make the journey every year. Laypeople often recalled the exciting experiences, and diverse fellow pilgrims, they had encountered en route to the summit.

For Thangmi living in the villages of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok, the arduous uphill journey to the summit of Kalinchok could be conceptualized as a pilgrimage in Victor Turner's classic terms, "betwixt and between the categories of ordinary social life" (1974: 273). However, a journey to the Suspa Bhumethan, located right in the

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Khasa/Dram. All of these pilgrimages had similar ritual forms, and all were also joined by a people from a range of ethnic groups.

<sup>65</sup> See Tautscher (2007) for a full description of the role that this pilgrimage site plays in Tamang practice. Miller (1997[1979]) also describes a pilgrimage to Kalinchok in the company of caste Hindu "faith healers".

midst of the most accessible Thangmi village, could only really be imagined as a pilgrimage in the classic sense for Thangmi who lived outside of the area. However, as Simon Coleman and John Eade have argued, perhaps the Turnerian definition of pilgrimage is too limited, and:

pilgrim sites, rather than being contexts for the cultivation of anti-structure, can provide arenas for the rhetorical, ideologically charged assertion of apparent continuity, even fixity, in religious and wider social identities. (2004: 15)

It was in this sense that thinking of the Suspa Bhumethan itself as a pilgrimage site opened new possibilities for asserting Thangmi claims to singular authority over an ethnic territory. Emerging out of Thangmi activist agendas in India, the idea of Suspa Bhumethan as a pilgrimage site was initially articulated in a translocal idiom that downplayed the temple's situatedness within the nation-state of Nepal (as in the photo caption cited above). At the same time, the very fact that Thangmi who resided outside the putative borders of Thangmi ethnic territory wanted to visit the Bhumethan (while they were relatively uninterested in Kalinchok), brought the Suspa temple, as well as the people who lived around it, into relationship with ideas of an exclusive ethnic territory articulated in relation to national and transnational regimes for recognizing indigeneity.

Thangmi activists in Nepal liked the idea of Suspa Bhumethan as a pilgrimage site because it deemphasized the inter-ethnic, localized terms in which gurus asserted ethnic power at Kalinchok, resituating pilgrimage practice in an exclusively Thangmi environment which

provided evidence of singular ethnic power in terms recognizable to the nation–state. No specific efforts were made to stop pilgrimage to Kalinchok, but in public contexts NTS leaders began describing the Suspa Bhumethan as the only important Thangmi pilgrimage site.<sup>66</sup> As Tek Bahadur, the young activist from Lapilang introduced at the beginning of this chapter, explained to me in early 2008, “Kalinchok is a place where gurus go to fight with shamans from other ethnic groups, it’s not so important for people like us. Bhumethan is really the place for younger Thangmi to go every year in order to show that this is our territory.” He then proceeded to tell me that in his role as JANSEEP coordinator, he had invited a film crew from Nepal TV to travel from Kathmandu to Dolakha with him in order to document that year’s upcoming Bhume Jatra. Tek Bahadur was not alone in representing participation in the Bhume Jatra festival as equivalent to undertaking a pilgrimage to a sacred site. Indeed, for activists who lived outside the bounds of ethnic territory, the Suspa Bhumethan had become sacralized as an easily recognizable symbol of that territory’s existence, and the journey to the temple—rather than simply the events once there—began to take on ritual qualities. For most participants in the festival, however, the temple was still right next door.

One way of appropriating the symbolic power of the Bhumethan, even when one could not actually make the journey to Suspa, was to

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<sup>66</sup> The Nepali term *tirthayatra* was often used for “pilgrimage”, but the English term was also commonly inserted in Nepali sentences. At the end of Chapter 4, I describe another kind of proposed pilgrimage site which was also referred to in English, in this case as a “cultural heritage site”.

reterritorialize Bhume elsewhere. In a phenomenon that Katia Buffetrille (1996) describes as “flying mountains”, there are several examples in which Tibetan and Himalayan territorial deities—usually identified with sacred mountains—are known to have been transferred from one physical abode to another as people themselves move from place to place. In Darjeeling, some Thangmi had taken the initiative to do this themselves, building small shrines outside their houses at which they propitiated Bhume in the private lineage deity sense. I interviewed two people who had done this, and both of them stated that only after they procured a metal trident that had originally been consecrated at the Suspa Bhumethan did they feel that their own shrines were efficacious. Without that physical link to the Suspa Bhumethan, the deity would not recognize the new shrine as its abode.

Despite the long-standing existence of these private lineage deity shrines, Bhume’s presence in its communal territorial deity aspect had not been fully realized in Darjeeling during the time of my fieldwork. Instead, Thangmi Bhume propitiations were conducted at the large Mahakal temple above Darjeeling bazaar. Like Kalinchok in Nepal, this large complex was an inter-ethnic ritual site, with both Hindu and Buddhist shrines, as well as shrines dedicated by individual community and ethnic organizations for the special use of their members. In the earlier phase of pan-Nepali identity construction in Darjeeling, Mahakal had been a key site for the demonstration of ethnic unity, since in the absence of separate ritual spaces, every group of Nepali heritage

conducted its rituals there. As one member of the Thangmi community in Darjeeling who was in his 80s explained to me, “Bhadau Purnima is the biggest Thami holiday here. On that day, we have a big meeting and Guru Puja. We use the occasion to show our ethnic unity [with other Nepali groups]”. Indeed, on Bhadau Purnima, the same day of the calendar that Thangmi in Nepal had made their pilgrimage to Kalinchok, Thangmi in Darjeeling had participated in the inter-ethnic Guru Puja, a source of pride for many Thangmi of this elder speaker’s generation.

By the time I arrived in Darjeeling, however, the era of tribal politics was well underway, and the inter-ethnic ritual space of Mahakal was no longer felt to be adequate. Along with initiating pilgrimages to the Suspa Bhumethan, Thangmi activists in India sought to establish a similarly exclusive marker of Thangmi ethnic territory in Darjeeling. A formal proposal requesting land and funds to build an exact replica of the Suspa Bhumethan building in Darjeeling was submitted to the municipal government in 2003. Two years later, the municipality approved the proposal to build the temple on a piece of land where a defunct Thangmi-owned jam factory stood. In August 2005, the land was officially deeded to the BTWA by the three brothers who had inherited this property from their father (who had been known as “Jamwala”).<sup>67</sup> As Shova, then the BTWA secretary, told me, “Jamwala

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<sup>67</sup> Intriguingly, the land title document states that the benefactors who are donating it to the BTWA are “by faith Hindu”.

really cared about the improvement of the Thami community. He made many contributions to our organization while he was alive. He would be very happy to know that we are finally building our own Bhumethan here on his land”.

At the groundbreaking ceremony in late 2005, Latte Apa planted in the earth a small metal trident from the Suspa Bhumethan, which he had commissioned a circular migrant from Nepal to deliver.<sup>68</sup> Some BTWA members questioned the need for this link to Suspa, but Latte Apa explained that without this physical connection, the deity might not recognize its new abode, and the guru was allowed to proceed. Many speakers at the program described how the prospect of having their own Bhume temple signified that the Thangmi community had finally “arrived”, both as Indian citizens in general and as an indigenous group deserving of tribal status. On the first count, having their own Bhumethan meant that they would no longer need to reference the Suspa Bhumethan in Nepal as the source of their immediate territorial power, thereby once and for all confirming their status as full Indian citizens. On the second count, they would no longer need to rely solely upon participation in inter-ethnic ritual events at Mahakal to demonstrate their relationship to Bhume through ephemeral practice. Instead, they could point to Bhume’s physical presence in the temple building as incontrovertible evidence of the link

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<sup>68</sup> In September 2007, Shova told me that this trident had since been removed from the building site, since the BTWA now sought to downplay any “Hindu” aspects of their practice since they had been told that evidence of such might disqualify them from being recognized as tribal. See Chapter 7 for further details of these dynamics.



between ethnicity and territory not just in Nepal, but in India too—the foundation of an *adivasi* identity.

Even before the temple building was completed, during my last visit to Darjeeling in late 2006, I saw that the Bhumethan construction site was already becoming an important communal location at which both Thangmi from India and Nepal gathered. The very idea of a Bhumethan in Darjeeling seemed to create parity between Thangmi from Nepal and their counterparts in India, by emphasizing their shared identity as inhabitants of Bhume's domain, whatever their national, educational or economic status. Through the processes of reconceptualizing the Suspa Bhumethan as a pilgrimage site, and building a new Bhumethan in Darjeeling, Thangmi ritual productions of a transcendent ethnic territory had converged across national borders. Each Bhumethan simultaneously served as an anchor for a shared set of propitiation practices through which identity was produced at the local level, as well as serving as a pilgrimage site to those from far away, together marking the translocal whole of Thangmi ethnic territory. The political deployments of this territory would certainly differ within each nation–state framework—in Nepal, it would be used to make claims to an autonomous territory within a newly restructuring state, while in India it would be used to claim an individual tribal identity in contradistinction to the pan–Nepali territorial autonomy promised by the passage of the Sixth Schedule to India's constitution—but the mechanisms through which such territory was produced in

each location were becoming increasingly similar. For people who moved back and forth between Nepal and India, without necessarily conceptualizing their movement as pilgrimage, encountering evidence of Bhume's presence everywhere they went just confirmed what they already knew: that it was all one village, in which Bhume was everywhere and nowhere at once.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The Work of Social Reproduction: Clan Affiliations and the Life Cycle

*Yo parampara hoina, kam ho.*

“This is not tradition, it’s work.”

– Ram Bahadur, Dumkot guru, of a funerary ritual in Dolakha, 2004

*Bhojuko kam sakera ‘meeting’ ko kam garnu parcha.*

“Now that grandmother’s work [cremation] is finished, we must have a meeting [literally: do the work of a meeting].”

– Gautam, BTWA activist, at a cremation in Darjeeling, 2003

This chapter explores how life cycle rituals effect the “work” of social reproduction across the Thangmi community. In particular, the marriage (T: *bore*) and funerary (T: *mumpra*) ritual cycles at once posit a specific quality of Thangminess as a prerequisite for their success, and provide a means of recognizing that quality in one’s self through the explicit articulation of clan affiliations.<sup>1</sup> This quality is not based on an essential notion of purity embodied in idioms of blood (Clarke 1995) or bone (Levine 1981) as is common elsewhere in the Himalayas, but rather in a processual concept of how one becomes Thangmi—or more accurately, how one does Thangminess—through participation in a set of rituals that are themselves synthetic in nature. This assertion returns to the argument made in Chapter 3 that Thangmi modes of self-recognition emphasize practice—“what Thangmi do”—rather than essence —“what Thangmi are”. Exploring how life cycle rituals work for

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<sup>1</sup> In the Sindhupalchok dialect of Thangmi *mumpra* becomes *mampira*. Since Dolakha dialect has a greater number of speakers, *mumpra* is heard more frequently both in Nepal and India (see Turin 2006 for details of dialect differences), and I use this term throughout.

a range of Thangmi individuals in different locations helps to demonstrate how Thangminess is constructed not only in relation to the discursive imperatives of political recognition, but is also produced through the affective imperatives of spiritual recognition, even in the case of those Thangmi whose desire to participate in the latter is prompted by the former. Such individuals still have children, get married, and part with their dead. It is through these processes that they come to recognize themselves as Thangmi at the subjective level, in large part by articulating a clan identity through participation in life cycle rituals. Once engaged in, the affective dimensions of such practices both counter and condition political agendas.

In making this assertion, I engage in the long-standing anthropological discussion over the relationship between “structure” and “sentiment” in shaping ritualized behavior. As Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington explain:

The funeral material [as presented by Durkheim] makes it clear that emotional “effervescence” does not replace structure but, on the contrary, results from structure. Durkheim's approach stands in contrast to later debates in anthropology that saw explanations based on “structure” and those based on “sentiment” as mutually exclusive. (1991: 51)

In particular, Metcalf and Huntington cite Radcliffe-Brown, whose functionalist paradigm they read as granting ritual the exclusive power to generate emotion in a unidirectional manner; Bloch and Parry (1982), whom they see as continuing this tradition by privileging the role of ritual over that of emotion (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 2);

and Rosaldo (1989), who tends towards the other extreme with an analysis that “lays emphasis on the power of emotion and is contemptuous of mere ritual forms” (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 3). Here, I follow Metcalf and Huntington’s lead by returning to a Durkheimian position that sees “structure” and “sentiment” as mutually productive, rather than mutually exclusive, and applies this understanding not only to ritual, but ethnicity. In other words, in my analysis of Thangmi life cycle rituals, I strive to understand the *relationship* between structure and sentiment—or in the terms of classical ethnicity theory, the relationship between instrumentality and affect—in producing and reproducing ethnicity through ritualized behavior.

### *The habise Chant*

In 1999, I attended what was to be the first of many *mumpra* in the Dolakha village of Suspa. Over the course of my fieldwork, I observed ten such events, almost evenly split between Nepal and India. I quickly learned that for most Thangmi—regardless of their citizenship, educational status, or views on textuality and orality—the *mumpra* was the definitive ritual process through which their sense of belonging to a collective was produced in the present, and through which they were reassured that the collective would continue to exist in the future. More so than any other Thangmi ritual, the elements of the *mumpra* were remarkably similar from place to place, and guru to guru,

although these components themselves were of a diverse, synthetic nature.

At that first funerary ritual in Dolakha, as I entered the kerosene lamp-lit house for the all night *habise* (T) ritual which prefaced the major funerary ritual (T: *jekha mumpura*) that would take place the following day, I was surprised to hear several voices rise in unison to chant the refrain *om mani padme hum*. I recognized this as the Buddhist mantra of the deity Avalokiteshvara (or Chen Rezig in Tibetan), which I had heard frequently in Tibetan contexts.<sup>2</sup> I did not expect to find it in this Thangmi ritual presided over by Guru Maila. In previous conversations with me, this guru had ardently advocated “Thangmi dharma” as a distinctive religion that could not be adequately described in terms of Buddhist, Hindu, or even Kirant religion. When he finally took a break from chanting to have a sip of beer, I asked Guru Maila why he was using a Tibetan Buddhist mantra. “What are you saying?” responded Guru Maila accusatorily. “It’s not Tibetan or Buddhist, it’s Thangmi ritual language.” Surely he was aware of the mantra’s Tibetan origin, I countered. “Well of course, Tibetan and Tamang lamas use this too,” he said. “But when we chant it, the language becomes Thangmi, otherwise the spirit of the dead person [T: *sidumi*] wouldn’t understand it. Isn’t that obvious?”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Studholme (2002) for a discussion of this mantra’s origins and meanings.

<sup>3</sup> Guru Maila here used the Thangmi term *sidumi*, which literally means “dead person” or “deceased”. Thangmi use this interchangeably with *masan*, derived from the Nepali *mosan*, as an umbrella term to refer to the whole of the deceased’s spiritual substance, or as Metcalf and Huntington put it, the “homomorphic counterpart of the deceased” (1991: 86). The Berawan soul that Metcalf and Huntington describe

I suddenly felt terribly embarrassed. I had been trying to reduce everything I encountered to one or the other relevant great traditions, just as earlier ethnographers must have done when they concluded that the Thangmi, “do not have any exclusive ritual worth mentioning” (Subba 1993: 185) because most of their ritual elements seemed familiar from Hindu and Buddhist contexts. The fact that the *habise* mantra had a clearly identifiable Tibetan cognate did not mean that it was “Tibetan” in any essential sense, just as the fact that Guru Maila was addressed as *lama bonpo* in his role as funerary priest (see Chapter 3) did not mean that he was a lama in the Tibetan sense.<sup>4</sup> The *habise* mantra had its own meanings and effects within this Thangmi ritual context, within which it was just one of several components, some of which appeared Hindu in origin (like the fact that the male mourners all had shaved their heads), others which appeared Buddhist (like the *habise* mantra), and still others which seemed distinctively Thangmi, such as the reconstruction of the deceased’s body from a range of every-day food items. According to Guru Maila, the soothing repetition of the *habise* mantra gave the spirit notice to prepare its self for the transformations it was to undergo during the *mumpra* the following day, while also providing reassurance it would be well cared

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changes its nature and manifestations at different points in the funerary ritual cycle, while in the Thangmi context, the *sidumi* is perceived as a whole, but different aspects of it are addressed by each phase of the *mumpra*. Here, I use the term English “spirit” when referring to the *sidumi* as a whole.

<sup>4</sup> Andras Höfer cautions against this kind of reductionism in the analysis of Tamang oral texts: “Etymological meanings serve to throw some light on the sources and the development of Tamang oral tradition, rather than to ‘correct’ present meanings as given by the informants” (1999: 234–235).

for during the process. As will be discussed in further detail below, such explanations fit well within a van Gennepian–Hertzian schema that identifies separation, transition, and incorporation as the primary objectives of mortuary ritual (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 130).

For a moment, Guru Maila’s explanation that the mantra had to be Thangmi so that the spirit could understand it made perfect sense to me—indeed, how could a Thangmi spirit be expected to understand a language not its own? In the harsh light of day the next morning, however, Guru Maila’s logic appeared utterly tautological. If this mantra, which even the guru acknowledged had non–Thangmi antecedents, became Thangmi in the ritual context simply because the spirit already was, what actually constituted the spirit’s Thangminess? How did we know that the spirit was not something else, or that other forms of ritual or language would not work equally well to dispatch it to the realm of the ancestors?

### *Clan Identities, Marriage and Death*

Over time, I came to understand that the qualifications to become a Thangmi ancestor in death were established by the possession of a Thangmi clan identity in life, which was explicitly affirmed at the time of marriage. Before marriage, ethnic identity was seen as relatively flexible, particularly (although not exclusively) in the case of women. An individual’s Thangminess therefore had to be publically articulated through the assertion of his or her clan identity during the marriage



ritual cycle, which often took several years to complete. By the time of death, however, possibilities for alternative identities had been foreclosed, and in order to be efficacious—to accomplish its “work”, to use the colloquial metaphor that Thangmi regularly used to describe this particular ritual process—the funerary rites had to take place within a bounded Thangmi frame of reference. These parameters took shape between the nodal points of the guru himself, the clan members and out-clan affinal relatives required for certain ritual tasks, the household in which the ritual took place, and the ritual language used to invoke the spirit’s presence, all of which could only be efficacious if they were in themselves Thangmi. The objective of *bore* marriage rituals, then, was to socially validate couples as legitimate reproducers of Thangminess at the individual level (often after the biological fact of reproduction, since marriage rituals were commonly completed long after children were born), while the *mumpura*’s objective as funerary rite was to create Thangmi ancestors and attach them to Thangmi territory, thereby guaranteeing the persistence of Thangminess at the communal level. Clan affiliations facilitated the relationship between these two levels of identity.

Unlike that of funerary rituals, the form of marriage rituals varied substantially from place to place as well as over time, and had been particularly influenced by normative discourses and practices of gender and sexual propriety in both Nepal and India. Still, despite the differences in ritual practice at each juncture of location and history,

the ritual objectives of both marriages and funerals, and the particular notion of Thangminess that they entailed, remained fairly constant. As Hertz famously noted, the similarity between marriage and death rites, “expresses a basic analogy”, in that both bring about a fundamental change of status, in which, “transition from one group to another, whether real or imaginary, always supposes a profound renewal of the individual” (2004<sup>f</sup>[1907]: 209). However, I suggest that within the Thangmi context, funerals are accorded greater priority than marriages, perhaps for much the same reasons that Metcalf and Huntington describe for the Berawan—in short, that in a system with little status or rank differentiation, mortuary rites provide the most concrete means of reproducing sociality (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 150). Like the Berawan, the Thangmi do not have “a rigid system of prescribed rank” and it is not “possible to specify the status of a child”, so mortuary rituals provide a social concreteness that weddings cannot match (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 150).

### *What Makes a Thangmi Soul?*

Thangminess appeared to be understood as a specific, embodied quality, but one whose existence could only be fully validated through participation in the life cycle rituals that prompted its self-recognition. This quality of Thangminess was not necessarily present from birth, since in many cases it was never ritually affirmed until marriage, at which time a clan identity could be assigned by a guru if it had not

been inherited from one's father or mother (i.e. if one was not in fact "Thangmi" by descent). Once an individual's clan affiliation had been made explicit through the rituals of marriage, this identity could not be easily rejected.<sup>5</sup> All of this held true even for those individuals most assimilated to mainstream pan-Nepali practices in Darjeeling—even the Tumsong tea plantation family, for example, had passed on knowledge of their clan name through otherwise increasingly Hinduized generations. The very ability to state their clan affiliation marked them as Thangmi at some level (to themselves and others), even though they did not maintain all of the associated ritual practices which would have brought about a greater sense of self-recognition as such. Accordingly, many members of the family were strongly conflicted about their simultaneous possession and dispossession of Thangminess.

In the introduction to a recent compendium on the anthropology of death, Antonius Robben asks, "How often do deaths in the personal sphere or in the field remain unreported?" (2004: 13). He continues to suggest that such personal experiences may deeply influence individual anthropologists' interpretations of death rites within their chosen ethnographic domain, citing in particular the probable effects

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<sup>5</sup> This begs the question of what happens to people who never marry. This was an extremely small percentage of the adult Thangmi population, since there was no tradition of religious asceticism, and marriage—at least for some time period, even if it was followed by divorce—was the expected life path for both men and women. I therefore never observed a *mumpura* for an unmarried individual, but I was told by several gurus that it would diverge substantially from the usual ritual practice for a host of reasons, since there would also be no affinal relatives or sons to act as the primary mourners, and this would affect the way that ritual space was conceptualized.

of Malinowski's mother's death on his interpretation of Trobriand mourning, and Renato Rosaldo's well-known shift in interpreting Ilongot grief in the wake of his wife Michelle's death (Robben 2004: 13). In my case, the death of my 96 year-old grandmother, who passed away in Israel in 2004 while I was conducting fieldwork in Darjeeling, led to a key set of insights about how Thangminess was constituted through a life-long set of ritual practices which occasioned self-recognition. I had been very close to my grandmother, and since it was logistically impossible for me to travel to the funeral in time, I wanted to mark her passing in some way. I asked Latte Apa if he could conduct a *mumpra* for my grandmother. The request was a genuine one on my part—like many Thangmi laypeople, I was quite taken by Latte Apa's charismatic personality as a ritual officiant, and had imagined that just as I had often seen Buddhist lamas conduct memorial rituals for the deceased relatives of Western friends in Kathmandu, Latte Apa could conduct a *mumpra* for my grandmother. Reasoning that, "funerals are concerned more with the living than the dead" [V. Turner 1967: 8, citing Radcliffe-Brown]), I imagined that the fact that the *mumpra* would be meaningful to me within the context of my research on Thangmi ritual would make it worthwhile, even though neither my grandmother nor I were Thangmi. Furthermore, since the main *mumpra* typically took place several days, weeks or months after the body was cremated, I thought that it would not be a problem to

conduct one in a situation where the actual body of the deceased was oceans away.

Both of these assumptions turned out to be misguided. Latte Apa listened to my request carefully. “You must be suffering now that your grandmother has died, we all experience that suffering when one of our own goes,” he said. “But I need to think about it for a little while. Can you come back tomorrow?”.

The next day I made my way back down the slippery path to his one-room wooden house. He was sitting cross-legged on the bed. “Ah hah, here you are,” he said, “I have been waiting for you, your request kept me from sleeping last night since I did not know the answer right away. No one has ever asked me to do a *mumpra* outside the Thangmi community before.” I was surprised to hear this senior figure of cultural authority admit that there was something he did not know, and flattered by the attention he had given to the issue. “Here is the problem,” he said,

I could do the *mumpra*, which might give you a feeling of satisfaction. But that is because you have been living with Thangmi people for a long time and you understand what it means to do a *mumpra*. But your grandmother, now I am sure she was a respectable member of her own society in her life, but she was not a Thangmi. She was not born a Thangmi and I do not think she married a Thangmi.

He looked to me for confirmation. “True,” I said. He continued,

This means that she did not belong to a Thangmi clan, and so, speaking truthfully, nothing about her was Thangmi. So her spirit, which has not yet left the world of the living, would not respond when I call it to come into the grains [in which the body

is reconstructed during the *mumppra*]. She would not know that I was talking to her. It is only for Thangmi, she would not understand it or know that this *mumppra* was for her. Since she never saw a *mumppra* in life, how would she know what it was in death? Anyway, her soul must be hanging around her own house, or maybe the house of her oldest son, that is why *mumppra* are always conducted near the house of the chief mourner.<sup>6</sup> I am sure we are too far away for her soul to travel. No, I am sorry, it will not work, and it could even be dangerous. It could confuse her if somehow she heard that you were calling her—that is the only way I can see that she would even know to come near, since she does not know me or my language—but still she would not understand how to become an ancestor in the Thangmi way. I do not know what would happen to her soul if that happened, but I don't think you should wish for it. What does your *jat* [ethnicity/caste] do after death anyway? I think that is what you should do, and I cannot do that.

The situation had compelled Latte Apa to think carefully through his own ritual logic. His answer helped me understand that Thangmi practice, although synthetic, could not encompass the souls of those who did not already possess Thangminess. Contrary to my naïve expectations, Thangmi practice was not inclusive in the same manner as Buddhist practice seemed to be; rather it was more similar to my native Judaism in its exclusivity than I had previously understood.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the universalizing tradition of Buddhism, which incorporated new adherents without regard to their background, like Hinduism, both the Jewish and Thangmi religious systems for the most part limited access to those who possessed a specific internal quality which defined

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<sup>6</sup> Here I translate the Nepali term *atma* as “soul”.

<sup>7</sup> The fact that like Jews, the Thangmi consider the consumption of pork taboo (in contrast to their Kirant neighbors), had already led to jokes between me and Thangmi friends about being each other's “lost tribe”.

them as already part of that system.<sup>8</sup> However, both allowed “conversion” in the context of marriage, at which point Thangminess could be conferred through the assignment of a clan identity and participation in the marriage rituals themselves, as we shall see below. I shared with Latte Apa my rudimentary knowledge of Jewish funerary practices, and agreed with him that some approximation of this would be more suitable for my grandmother than a Thangmi *mumpra*.

### *Thangmi Clans: Parallel Descent in Theory and Practice*

In Rangathali Ya’apa and Sunari Ama had seven sons and seven daughters. But there was no one for these sons and daughters to marry, except each other, which was impossible since they were brother and sister. So Ya’apa and Sunari sat down to discuss the situation. They decided to assign each of the children separate clans, after which they could marry each other. They gave arrows to their sons and held a shooting event. Wherever each son’s arrow landed, that place or thing would become his clan name. Then they went to see what kind of work each daughter was doing, and that became her clan name.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> There has been much discussion over whether “Jewishness” is a religious or ethnic identity. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish\\_identity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_identity) (accessed November 9, 2008; although I do not generally rely on Wikipedia, here I simply want to provide an accessible portal to the popular debate over these issues). One could ask the same of “Thangminess”, and in my mind, the answer is comparable: both are simultaneously religious and ethnic identities, with the balance between the two dependent on political, historical and individual particularities which vary contextually. In both situations, the ethnic aspect of the identity is marked in large part by religious and/or ritual symbolism (although not exclusively, and for both groups economic status and stereotypes are probably the next most important set of markers), even for individuals who do not participate extensively in the practices from which those symbols derive (such as myself). A more systematic comparison of the identity that is often expressed as “culturally Jewish” in the US—which leaves unstated the presumed opposite against which it is defined, the “ritually Jewish”—and what we might call “cultural Thangminess”, particularly in India, could be worthwhile.

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to David Holmberg for suggesting that the natural and domestic objects from which clan names derive might be conceptualized as totems.

As presented in Chapter 6, this description of the origin of Thangmi clans is part of the *paloke* that gurus chant in some form on all major ritual occasions. The mythic episode presented here functions as a sociological schema in the Lévi-Straussian sense (1987[1973]: 163), as it is one of the most widely discussed portions of the origin myth among Thangmi everywhere, and is often used as the basis for contemporary identity claims.

The myth suggests that the entire *raison d'être* of the clan system is to remove the stigma of incest from the inevitable marriages of brothers to sisters. However, this problem does not become evident until the children have reached marriageable age, so before that time there is no clan system. In contemporary practice, those children born to Thangmi parents are recognized as having an incipient clan affiliation at the time of birth based on descent from their mother or father depending on their gender, but still these memberships are only made socially explicit and meaningful at the time of marriage.<sup>10</sup>

The myth also crucially outlines a system of parallel descent, in which men and women have separate clan affiliations, which they pass on to their same-sex children.<sup>11</sup> This means that opposite sex siblings

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<sup>10</sup> Further research is necessary on the rituals conducted for those who die in an unmarried state. All of the *mumpras* I witnessed were for married individuals.

<sup>11</sup> The term parallel descent seems to have been coined by Davenport (1959: 579). Systems that fit this description are rare anywhere in the world, but variations on the theme have been described for the Apinaye of Brazil (Maybury-Lewis 1960); the Quechua of Peru (Isbell 1978); the Ainu of Japan (Sjöberg 1993: 68); and the Ömie of Papua New Guinea, although in this case the author prefers the term “sex-affiliation” (Rohatynskyj 1997). In addition, the practice of serfdom in historical Tibet has been characterized as having an element of “parallel descent”, as Goldstein explains: “all laymen and laywomen in Tibet were serfs (*Mi ser*) bound via ascription by parallel



with the same biological parents can never be of the same clan, since they inherit their clan identity from their same-sex parents. This makes it sound as if the practice of clan exogamy in choosing marriage partners—which is shared by many Himalayan ethnic groups—would be very easy, since all men and women are already members of different clans. To the contrary, it becomes more complicated, since the clan affiliations of *both* the potential marriage partner and his or her sisters or brothers are considered, and ideally there should not be any shared clan affiliations through either the male or female line for seven generations.<sup>12</sup> This suggests that although clan affiliation passes primarily from same-sex parents to children, it is not entirely bounded by gender.

Similarly, in theory, women should inherit and use their mother's clan name exclusively, but in reality women often identify themselves by their father's, and in some cases, husband's, clan name as well (while men almost never invoke their mother's or wife's clan name). Such patterns may be relatively recent, as I found that knowledge of female clans in particular, but male clans as well, was rapidly disappearing or being redeployed in new ways in both Nepal and

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descent to a particular lord (dPon-po) though an estate, in other words sons were ascribed to their father's lord but daughters to their mother's lord" (1971: 15). However, it is unclear if this economic form of "descent" is linked to other aspects of clan identity or not. More detailed comparison of the Thangmi parallel descent system with others elsewhere in the world would be a productive avenue for future research.

<sup>12</sup> I am unable to describe the Thangmi kinship system in detail here. See Turin (2004b, 2006a: Chapter 2.7) for a full description with charts.

India.<sup>13</sup> The details of these transformations will be described at the end of this section; first I wish to focus for a moment on the range of male and female clan names, their meanings and their geographical distribution.

Ya'apa then told his seven sons and daughters [who were now married to each other] to migrate to different parts of this area. In order to decide where they would each go, the seven brothers climbed to the top of Kiji Topar ["Black Summit", the Thangmi name for Kalinchok], where they held a second archery contest. Each brother followed his arrow and went to live with his wife wherever it landed. The places were as follows [by descending order of the age of the sons who settled there]: Surkhe, Suspa, Dumkot, Lapilang, Kusati, Alampu, and Kuthisyang.

Just as every guru has his own *palo*, every Thangmi village is said to have its own clans, and just as the complexity and inconsistency of the *palo* can be frustrating to those who seek to standardize them, so can the wide array of clan names. In short, although certain clan names are found in several locations, there are as many that are found only in specific places, and still others which are compound combinations of two terms which are found separately elsewhere. There are also several names which appear to be etymologically similar, but have different pronunciations across dialect zones. There is not a clear bipartite division of society into two supra-clans, as Holmberg (1989) describes for a western Tamang locale in the Himdung and Dimdung, nor is there any clear sense of status hierarchy between the clans, which are

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<sup>13</sup> Already in 1978, Peet stated that, "Whether at one time there were also female lineages is hard to determine. Clearly all informants agree that there were originally named female kin groups, but their exact form and function could not be remembered" (229).

different in each village.<sup>14</sup> If the mythical migrations described in the origin story are grounded in historical reality, these regional differences may be explained by the fact that the inhabitants of each area are descended from the clan that settled there, especially if the early Thangmi practiced patrilocal marriage, as they do today and few men from other clans were brought in. Over time, the population might have expanded through group-exogamous marriage, with new clans emerging in response to inheritance disputes and other social fractures. Man Bahadur, a well-respected figure in Chokati, a Sindhupalchok village not included in the list of the original seven settlements, where clan names differ substantially from those found elsewhere, explained that, “Over time, brothers leave their natal villages due to inheritance problems, and in this way, the clans travel and also transform as new lineages are established.”

Such transformations are also common in India, where Thangmi from different parts of the Nepal have met and married over several generations. For this reason, one finds the most eclectic and dense range of clan names within a small geographical region in Darjeeling, where Thangmi who trace their heritage to different villages in Nepal are familiar with different sets of clans. However, membership is

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<sup>14</sup> The authors of *Nan Ni Patuko* assert that at least in Lapilang, the three clans of Markebhot, Sansari and Akyangmi, “performed ritual duties for the other Thamis and are dependent on others for a living” (Patuko 2054 VS: 4), a statement which is repeated in *Thami Samudaya* (Samudaya 2061 [2056]: 20). None of my data suggests that this is the case in current practice, although it may have been at some point in the past. Several guru and laypeople to whom I read this statement to inquire about its veracity dismissed it as the fantasy of activists in Nepal who wanted to appear more “modern” (i.e. more “Hindu”) by asserting that the Thangmi had a caste system.

concentrated in a few clans, since early migrants often came to Darjeeling through kinship connections, and therefore certain clans were over-represented while others were under-represented.

For all of these reasons, it is pointless to provide an exhaustive list of all of the clan names attested to in different locations; several of the Thangmi publications present such information, and there is little to be gained from repeating the exercise.<sup>15</sup> Instead, I take the clan names most commonly found in the Damarang and Pashelung areas of Suspa-Kshamawati VDC, Dolakha, as a single example for further analysis. I choose this particular set of clan names because I worked most extensively in this locale, and therefore had the opportunity to discuss the details at length with several laypeople and gurus, including Rana Bahadur and Guru Maila. According to these informants, the original clans, seven each, male and female, were as follows:

**Male**

*akal akyangmi*  
*kyangpole akyangmi*  
*areng akyangmi*  
*dumla akyangmi*  
*danguri akyangmi*  
*mosanthali akyangmi*  
*jaidhane akyangmi*<sup>16</sup>

**Female**

*budati*  
*yante siri*  
*khatu siri*  
*calta siri*  
*alta siri*  
*khasa siri*  
*bampa siri*

All of these names have clear, commonly known etymologies in the Thangmi language, with the exception of the final male clan, *jaidhane*,

<sup>15</sup> See, for example Reng (1999: 26–27).

<sup>16</sup> Other male clans found in this area, but not considered to be among the “original” seven, were *budapere*, *dungsupere* and *saiba akyangmi*. Two further clans *roimirati* (male) and *apan siri* (female) will be discussed below.

the meaning of which remains a subject of conjecture. Several of the male clans are traceable to the terms for specific plants in which the arrows of the original Thangmi brothers are said to have lodged, while many of the female clan names allude to design features of Thangmi houses.

The term *akyangmi*, which appears in all of these male clan names, means “people of the needle wood tree”, referring to the common tree known as *chilaune* in Nepali (Latin: *Schima wallichii*).<sup>17</sup> Although it is unclear why this particular tree is of such importance, *akyangmi* is one of the most common components of Thangmi clan names everywhere. *Akal* refers to a flowering tree known as *chiplo kaulo* in Nepali (Latin: *Machilus odoratissima*). *Kyangpole* means “trunk of the needle wood tree”. *Areng* denotes an oak tree, *arkhaulo* in Nepali (Latin: *Lithocarpus elegans*), while *dumla* refers to a common fig, or *nebharo* in Nepali (Latin: *Ficus carica*).

*Danguri* means “the searcher”. According to the myth, after all the sons had shot their arrows, one of them was sent to find out where they had landed. He searched far and wide, and when he had collected all of the arrows and returned them to his parents, they dubbed him, “the one who searches”. In one version of the story, the son never finds his own arrow. He thus returns to his parents and brothers bearing only six arrows, and is thereafter fated to spend the rest of his life wandering. Some gurus suggest that the first migrants to India

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<sup>17</sup> All Nepali and Latin botanical terms are cited from Turin (2003).

therefore must have come from this clan. *Mosanthali*, which means “place of the spirits”, or perhaps “cremation ground”, is the single clan name derived from a Nepali language phrase.<sup>18</sup> This brother’s arrow is said to have landed in a cremation ground, an intriguing allusion to the central role of funerary rites in constituting Thangminess, since they are the only social event to be reflected in a clan name. However, contrary to what might be expected, contemporary members of this clan have no special status or chores in relation to death rituals. This is the norm for other clans as well. If there were any clan-specific statuses or functions in the past, they are now defunct, since despite my efforts, I was unable to collect any information about such roles even from the most otherwise knowledgeable senior informants. In this sense, in the contemporary Thangmi world, it is not the specific identity conferred by membership in any particular clan that is important, but rather the larger identity as Thangmi that the possession of a Thangmi clan name—regardless of which one—affirms.<sup>19</sup>

The seven daughters are said to have received their clan names while their brothers were busy firing their arrows. While the clan names of their brothers were determined by the plants their arrows hit, the women’s clan names were derived from whatever chore or craft they

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<sup>18</sup> *Mosanthali* is derived from the Nepali *masan*, “burning ground where the dead are burnt; burial-ground; cemetery; ghost” (Turner 1997 [1931]: 496) and *thali* “place, ground, spot” (Turner 1997 [1931]: 294–295).

<sup>19</sup> Peet made a similar observation: “Thamis behave as if general kindred ties (agnatic, cognatic, affinal) were about as important as any specific patrilineal connections” (1978: 230).

were engaged in. The term *siri*, which is suffixed to the end of each clan name, is derived from the Indo-European term *sri*, which is prefixed as a form of respectful address for men across South Asia (e.g. “Sri Basant Thami”). The questions of how this became attached to Thangmi female clan names as a suffix, and why the *budati* clan alone does not have it, remain puzzling.

Otherwise, *budati* is a Thangmi ritual language term for one of several types of leaf plates on which ritual offerings are made, and the daughter who received this name was said to have been involved in weaving them. Two other female clan names refer to plants: *alta siri* derives from the Thangmi *calta* “edible fern shoot”, or *unyu* in Nepali (Latin: *Dryopteris cochleata*), while *alta siri* derives from the Thangmi *altak*, or rhododendron (Latin: *Rhododendron arboreum*). These two daughters are said to have been out collecting fern shoots, rhododendron flowers and wood when the clan names were assigned.

The remaining female clan names allude to features of the Thangmi household. *Yante siri* refers to the quern, *yante* in Thangmi or *jato* in Nepali, a simple two-layered circular hand-driven millstone with a wooden handle, which continues to be a prominent feature of almost all Thangmi houses in Nepal.<sup>20</sup> *Khatu siri* refers to backstrap handlooms (*khatu*) which were once commonly used to weave simple

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<sup>20</sup> Insufficient food supply together with the considerable poverty of many rural Thangmi families in Nepal mean that they cannot afford to lose even the smallest measure of ground grain to the owner-operator of increasingly common electric or gas-powered mechanical mills as a commission.

clothes out of nettle and hemp fibers. Due to the time-consuming nature of these processes and the prevalence of cheap factory-made clothing, such weaving is now a rare occupation, but looms themselves are still stashed away in the corner of many households. *Khasa siri* derives from the archaic Thangmi *khasa*, meaning “ladder, wooden steps or stairs”, which this daughter was busy making from a tree trunk when the clan names were assigned. The final clan name, *bampa siri*, refers to the large, flat black stone which was once placed between the fireplace and the door in all Thangmi homes. The symbolic meanings of the *bampa* are discussed in Chapter 4; here we may simply recall that it is one of the most distinctive features of a traditional Thangmi house, and a potent symbol for contemporary activist representations of Thangmi identity. Some suggest that the seventh daughter was busy fashioning a *bampa* for her house when the clan names were distributed, while others say that she was cooking on the hearth in front of it.

### *Thangmi Egalitarianism?*

These clan names highlight the de facto differences between “men’s work” and “women’s work” by linking most of the male clans to the natural world, or specialized activities such as migration and funerary ritual, while female clans are overwhelmingly associated with every-day modes of domestic production such as grinding grain, collecting fodder, weaving and cooking. However, there are equal numbers of



male and female clans, and the names themselves are not inherently gendered. None of the female clan names refer to gendered activities such as child bearing or raising, nor do the clan names directly subordinate women and women's activities to men and men's activities. In this respect, the clan structure instantiates a so-called "egalitarian" model of social organization, which has been one of the few features of Thangmi society noted consistently by every researcher who has encountered it (Haimendorf in 1974 field notes, as cited in Shneiderman and Turin 2006; Miller 2007 [1979]; Peet 1978; Stein, personal communication). At least in theory, the origin myth outlines an egalitarian descent system, and in addition there are no prescribed social divisions based on relative purity and pollution such as those found in caste-Hindu communities, or in a more subtle manner within other *janajati* communities.<sup>21</sup> Thangmi individuals are often aware of the fact that such egalitarianism is not the norm among caste Hindu Nepalis, and at the level of both household conversation and political representation, it is cited as a distinctive feature of Thangminess. As my hostess in Suspa, a woman in her forties with no formal education,

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<sup>21</sup> NEFIN and other *janajati* organizations suggest that such egalitarianism is common to all *janajati* groups (for instance in the statement that *janajati* groups have no internal hierarchies, as cited in Chapter 3). However, issues of clan-based status and hierarchy have long been part of the internal cultural politics of many ethnic groups, with such dynamics perhaps most well-documented in the Gurung case (Macfarlane 1997). I am not suggesting that there are no inequalities and divides in the Thangmi community—I have outlined the major fault lines in Chapters 3 and 5—but rather that they are not determined by clan affiliation in an essential manner.

explained, “We can differentiate our ethnic group from others by the fact that we say, ‘men and women are equal’”.<sup>22</sup>

In reality, the dynamics of gender are much more complex than this, but a detailed examination of these issues is unfortunately beyond the scope of my discussion here.<sup>23</sup> In short, in Nepal, Thangmi women lag far behind men in terms of commonly used development indicators such as educational accomplishment and participation in politics and governance. For instance, no women have ever been office-holders in the NTS leadership, although there are several female general members. At the household level, however, women are often equally engaged in decision-making processes, and do not feel that they are discriminated against in the ways that they have observed their caste Hindu counterparts experience. Binita, a woman in Dolakha who was born a Chhetri, explained that she wanted to marry a Thangmi man in large part to escape the oppressive gender hierarchy of her natal community. She stated that she had not been disappointed in the relatively substantial degree of gender equality that she had experienced in her post-marriage identity as a Thangmi woman. Binita’s story will be discussed in further detail below.

In India, by contrast, Thangmi women are much more involved in associational life and politics, with several women holding prominent

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<sup>22</sup> Original Nepali: *Hamro jatle “mahila purus barabar ho” bhanera arko jat bata chutauna sakinchha.*

<sup>23</sup> I hope to address the politics of gender in the Thangmi world in a future article, with special attention to the manner in which parallel descent challenges the terms of classification and legal recognition in both Nepal and India.

leadership positions in the BTWA in both Darjeeling and Sikkim. However, within the discourses of *unnati* and pan-Nepali nationalism that prevailed in Darjeeling for the bulk of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the notion of parallel descent and the egalitarianism derived from it were long seen as erratic, anti-modern idiosyncrasies to be done away with, like other particularities of individual ethnic groups. In India, even old women for the most part did not know their mother's clan name, while in Nepal, most women over 30 still identified themselves by it. However, like almost all women in India, younger women in Nepal also did not use their mother's clan names. This does not mean, however, that Thangmi women who did not know their mother's clan names had no clan identity at all; rather, they had begun to identify themselves with their fathers', and in some cases, husband's, clan names. As Kamala, a woman in her mid-20s, responded with some frustration when I queried why she had stated her father's clan rather than her mother's when asked about her clan affiliation, "How would I know my clan? I never asked and my mother never talked about it." In contrast, she was well aware of her father's clan identity, which was often brought up in public discussions related to marriage, death and other rituals.

This begins to suggest how, over the last several decades, dominant Hindu-influenced gender ideologies have begun to impinge upon Thangmi gender practices in Nepal as well as in India. Other effects of this include the recent stigmatization of the Thangmi

practice of completing marriage rituals later in life, often only after children are born,<sup>24</sup> and the concomitantly liberal attitudes towards having multiple sexual partners (at least until any relationship results in children, at which point marriage is expected). Rather than bringing about greater equality, it seems that increased exposure to national discourses on gender and empowerment may have chipped away at long-standing egalitarian systems.<sup>25</sup>

### *The Politics of Clan Affiliation and Parallel Descent*

At the same time as female clan identities seemed to be diminishing in importance, male clan identities were taking on new meanings within political contexts. In the 1990s, many activists began to use their clan name as a last name in place of “Thami”, particularly in Nepal. Their rationale was that “Thami” was a label slapped upon them by the state, not their own ethnonym, which was “Thangmi”. Advocating the official use of “Thangmi”, however, was likely to lead to confusion, since it was so close to “Thami”, and in any case, if a change was to be made, shifting to clan names seemed most appropriate, since it was these which affirmed Thangmi identity at the individual level.<sup>26</sup> In India, by

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<sup>24</sup> This is often disparagingly referred to as *budho biha*—“the old folks’ wedding”—and has been written about by several non-Thangmi reporters in the Nepali press as an ethnic oddity. As with incest, this is one “traditional” Thangmi practice that activists have largely stayed away from valorizing since it is too overwhelmingly at odds with dominant attitudes that have influenced their personal moral sensibilities.

<sup>25</sup> This is more of a hunch than a hypothesis for now; substantiating it will require additional research and analysis. For discussions of related dynamics, see Tamang (2002), Pettigrew and Shneiderman (2004), Leve (2007).

<sup>26</sup> Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, similar debates raged among other ethnic communities in Nepal as well.

contrast, since the group had been engaged in seeking support or recognition from the state in some form since the 1940's on the basis of its name, it was not deemed strategic to use clan names in public contexts. Some individuals who did so based on their knowledge of this movement in Nepal were actively reprimanded by the BTWA leadership for potentially hurting the unity of the ethnic cause. By the late 2000s, the trend of using clan names in public documents and speeches had also largely abated in Nepal, apparently for reasons similar to those that had kept it from becoming popular in India. The prospect of state recognition within some sort of affirmative action system was on the cards as part of state restructuring, and activists began to fear that they would lose their hard-won, but still minimal, political visibility by shifting to clan names which were even less familiar than "Thami".

As Thangmi activists in both Nepal and India have sought to identify and objectify distinctive features of their culture for political purposes, they have faced the challenge of how to valorize the system of parallel descent as unique, without simultaneously affirming the historicity of the incest which generated it. This is a feature of the origin myth which many activists find morally abhorrent at a personal level, even if it might serve well to demonstrate the "primitiveness" of their group, a particularly salient feature within ST politics in India. Although it might appear easy to dismiss such concerns with the argument that the myth is just a myth, and therefore in no way

indicative of the sexual behavior of “real” Thangmi people, activists have invested so much in “proving” the “truth” of other aspects of the origin myth—such as those which bolster Thangmi claims to distinctiveness as discussed in Chapter 3, and those which establish Thangmi claims to territory discussed in Chapter 6—that it would be difficult for them to regard only this aspect of the story as myth, while treating the other parts of it as “truth”. Instead, they have discounted the incestuous versions of the myth as based on the hearsay “stories of the elders” rather than “research” (Samudaya 2061 [2056]: 17), and focused instead on crafting a new history. In a version of the origin story which was first presented in the 1999 *Dolakhareng*, and repeated in the 2002 *Thami Samudaya* and 2003 *Niko Bachinte* publications, there are in fact *two* ancestral Thangmi couples whose children marry each other, thereby avoiding the problem of incest. The first couple remains Ya’apa (Yapati Chuku) and Sunari Ama (Sunari Aji), as in the oral renditions of the myth that I recorded, while the second couple is called Uke Chuku and Beti Aji.<sup>27</sup> Khumbalal makes a strong argument for accepting this version of the story:

It is said that as there was no one else from the same ethnic group for the children of Yapati Chuku and Sunari Aji, so the seven daughters and seven sons were married to each other.

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<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to note that the 1997 *Nan Ni Patuko* publication posits only one couple, and does not yet seem concerned with the incestuous nature of their childrens’ relationships. Here however, the single couple has the names of what I have called the “second” couple: Uke Chuku and Beti Aji. Indeed, in some oral versions of the story that I documented, these were alternate names for Ya’apa and Sunari Ama. Ironically, activists who are otherwise concerned with standardization have exploited this inconsistency to suggest that these were actually two different couples.

This saying obviously can't be true. Those who tell these stories, whether scientists, old people from the Thami community, or foreigners, must be telling these stories on the basis of what they hear from elders, not by doing research...It is 100% mistaken that the sons and daughters of Yapati Chuku and Sunari Aji were married among themselves with each other (Samudaya 2061 [2056]: 17).

This critique of the origin myth—or at least of the way it is told by “old people”—is not perceived to undermine the presence of parallel descent or its power as an ethnic marker. For instance, Megh Raj, who argues against the incestuous version of the origin myth, elsewhere in the same publication claims that, “The female subcastes are unusual and proof of the originality of our identity” (Reng 1999: 27). Here, the functionalist tendencies of activist attitudes towards myth eclipse the structuralist ones (see Chapter 3), so that rather than acknowledging—as gurus do—that myth is about social impossibility, activists seek to transform the myth itself by rewriting it along the lines of the charter that they desire.

### *Becoming Thangmi at Birth*

What, exactly, does it mean to be born into a Thangmi clan? The answer is, not much. Ritually speaking, birth is the least important aspect of the life cycle for establishing an individual's Thangminess. Many families call a guru or *jhankri* to conduct a *nwaran*, a Nepali term for “naming ceremony” (Turner 1997 [1931]: 354) also used by other ethnic groups. Unlike at marriage or death rituals, where only fully trained senior gurus may officiate, lower-status *jhankri* may also

officiate at the *nwaran*. Some gurus did not like to conduct this ritual even though families requested it; Rana Bahadur stated that this was because it was a newly introduced ritual derived directly from normative caste-Hindu practices. He claimed that it had not been common in Dolakha when he left for India (around 1940), and that he had only seen it introduced after he returned in the late 1950s, with its popularity increasing steadily throughout the ensuing decades. From Rana Bahadur's perspective, the *nwaran* was not a Thangmi ritual, but one that some families wanted to adopt as part of a broader process of Hinduization, of which he was skeptical. The fact that he differentiated in kind between the virtues of appropriating wholesale a Hindu ritual like the *nwaran*, and integrating specific ritual elements associated with Hindu or Buddhist practices (such as head-shaving or the *habise* chant within the *mumpira*) into rituals that established their own synthetic Thangmi frame, was in itself an interesting commentary on the nature of synthetic subjectivity and its ritual expression.

Indeed, the *nwaran* seemed most important to Thangmi in urban Kathmandu and Darjeeling. There were three reasons for this. First of all, since it was a very brief ritual with simple offerings, it was much easier to organize than the multi-stage wedding or funerary rites with their esoteric collection of offerings, made up of natural and agricultural products often unavailable outside of Thangmi villages. Second of all, since it could be conducted by minor *jhankri* as well as guru, there was a much greater prospect of finding an appropriate



officiant, even in the absence of a senior guru.<sup>28</sup> Finally, since it was similar to Hindu naming rituals, it did not occasion feelings of embarrassment for those living in multi-ethnic environments, as the more “unusual” wedding and funeral rituals could.

Performed on the third or fifth day after birth, the *nwaran* is essentially a naming ritual. It also serves to disperse the ritual pollution of birth, which permeates the house in which the child was born, affecting all of the child’s immediate family, as well as both its paternal and maternal uncles. All of these individuals must be present at the ritual, during which the officiant consecrates the household with a mixture of cow urine, turmeric, *uirengpati*, and a type of grass called *kuruk*,<sup>29</sup> and ties a string soaked in this mixture around the baby’s wrist. This provides protection to the child for its first ventures outside the house; from the time of birth through receipt of this consecrated bracelet, the baby must be kept inside. The officiant then pronounces the child’s full name for the first time: both giving the baby a personal name (which may or may not be the same as the one the parents have chosen), and invoking his or her appropriate clan name based on the same-sex parent’s clan identity. Finally, a chicken is sacrificed to the household’s tutelary deity to ensure the child’s future success, and the

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<sup>28</sup> The fact that the *nwaran* could be conducted by *jhankri* might suggest that there are actually multiple officiants with the Thangmi ritual system, but here the exception proves the rule, since many guru themselves did not consider the *nwaran* a Thangmi ritual at all, as described above.

<sup>29</sup> According to Turner, *kuruk* is “an edible tip of *Asparagus plumosus*” (1997 [1931]: 100).

guru or *jhankri* is presented with the meat of this chicken, along with an offering of alcohol and some unhusked rice.

In village households in Nepal where this ritual is done, the entire process takes less than half an hour, and it is often done with minimal publicity—other members of the extended family or neighbors may not even know that it is occurring. Perhaps this understated approach is due to the fact that infant mortality rates continue to be very high, and therefore many parents do not want to ritually mark the birth of a child any more than is absolutely necessary. In discussing this issue, many informants in rural Nepal said that the most important feature of the *nwaran* was the audible pronunciation of the child's clan name, but that this can be done in a very discreet manner that does not require full ritual articulation. Once the ritual is over, the child's *nwaran* name is often not pronounced again until marriage.



Figure 7.1 Ram Krishna officiating at a *nwaran* in Kathmandu, November 2005

By contrast, in Darjeeling, and to some degree in urban Kathmandu and Jhapa as well, the *nwaran* has become a more important moment for demonstrating group identity. In the context of tribal politics, BTWA activists are eager to use any opportunity to publicly state their distinctive clan names, even if the form of the ritual within which they do so is not particularly distinctive, as in the case of the *nwaran*. Adapting to such desires, Latte Apa did not seem have the same resistance to conducting the *nwaran* that Rana Bahadur did. Indeed, he instead developed a rhetorical strategy for making the pronunciation of the child's name a more elaborate affair than it is elsewhere, taking as his model a part of the wedding ritual. There, the guru inserts brief histories of both the bride's and groom's lives into the *paloke*, mentioning the names of the places they have lived and their accomplishments in the same recitative style in which the locations along the ancestors' migratory routes are listed (see Chapter 6). Latte Apa incorporated a similar recitation into the *nwaran* by describing the parents' accomplishments and stating their clan names several times in the build-up to narrating the birth of the child and pronouncing his or her clan name: "... and now this child, he who is the son of Radha of the Alta Siri clan and Dipesh of the Akyangmi clan, this child of an Alta Siri mother and an Akyangmi father, he is now Akyangmi, let us welcome this new Akyangmi to the world".

At home with his own family, Latte Apa was in the habit of using the clan name "Akyangmi" as a pet name for his young grandson: "Eh,

Akyangmi, come here and eat your rice!” This was not standard practice, since most Thangmi would not refer to each other by clan names or even state them outside of a ritual context. Latte Apa’s deceptively simple habit served two purposes. First, it made his grandson aware of his Thangminess on an every-day basis, which Latte Apa perhaps felt was especially necessary since the child’s mother—the guru’s daughter-in-law—was by birth a Marwari woman who had received her Thangmi clan name at marriage. Secondly, without apparent political pretense, it communicated the distinctiveness of Thangmi identity to Latte Apa’s never-ending stream of Thangmi and non-Thangmi visitors. “Akyangmi, that’s an unusual name,” someone would invariably say, giving Latte Apa the opportunity to explain the term’s significance as a clan name and launch into a brief recitation of the origin myth if he felt so inspired.

Such rhetorical strategies were both necessary and effective in part due to Darjeeling’s ethnically heterogeneous residence patterns, in which neighbors—who were more often than not from a range of different ethnic groups—sought to be a part of each other’s life cycle rituals. Most residential clusters have their own neighborhood organization, which was usually involved in the financial sponsorship and planning of Thangmi birth, marriage and death rituals in Darjeeling—just as it was for comparable rituals of residents from every other ethnic group in the area. This meant that unlike in Nepal, where Thangmi generally lived in ethnically homogenous areas and

there were rarely any non-Thangmi present at such occasions, in Darjeeling a large proportion of the attendees at any life cycle ritual were from non-Thangmi backgrounds. Prior to 1990, multi-ethnic participation at such events probably compelled participants to de-emphasize the ethnically specific aspects of the ritual at hand, but in the highly-charged context of tribal politics in which I conducted my fieldwork, it had exactly the opposite effect, as both gurus and activists sought to use such occasions to convey to others exactly how uniquely Thangmi they and their rituals were. This prerogative led to the embedding of much additional explanatory rhetoric within the ritual chants themselves (like that described above in the *nwaran*). Non-Thangmi present at such occasions—along with many Thangmi themselves—could not be expected to understand the implicit purpose of each ritual element, and so it had to be made explicit. In this sense, even rituals like the *nwaran* which had very little distinctively Thangmi content could be used as arenas within which to objectify the rules of Thangmi ethnicity clearly for all to see.

### *Initiation Rites under Construction*

It was in this sense that a ritual known as *chewar* was also “under construction” as part of the Thangmi life cycle during the course of my fieldwork in Darjeeling. This hair-cutting ceremony for boys between the ages of three and five was essentially an initiation rite, and is well-documented across the Himalayas for groups such as the Tamang

(Fricke 1990; Holmberg 1989), Newar (Gellner forthcoming a) and caste Hindu groups (Michaels 2004). During the early phases of my research, such rituals were not common among Thangmi in Nepal, and I heard the term *chewar* for the first time in Darjeeling in 2004. There, several members of the BTWA who had experienced this ritual (either having their own hair cut or participating in the ceremony for close neighborhood friends) as an essential part of a generic, pan-Nepali culture, sought to Thangmify it.<sup>30</sup> This is perhaps a variation on the theme that David Gellner has described for other *janajati* groups who have begun to adopt Buddhism, for whom, “using life-cycle rituals to define a separate and to some extent oppositional social identity is a strategy that is now being followed, quite consciously and deliberately” (Gellner forthcoming a).

The BTWA activists adapted the ritual form with which they were familiar from the practice of other groups, but substituted a written version of some portion of the *paloke* to substitute for the mantras that would be chanted by a Hindu pandit or Buddhist lama in other ethnic contexts.<sup>31</sup> This scripturalized version of the *paloke* was necessary because most gurus refused to participate in this ritual

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<sup>30</sup> Chalmers has highlighted, “the rigidity which religious and ethnic affiliation had been bound together” (2003: 273) in the process of creating a pan-Nepali ethnic identity in Darjeeling. The dominant religious identity associated with this ethnicity was undoubtedly a Hindu one: “there was almost no questioning in public discourse of the consistent identification of Nepal and Nepalis with Hinduisim” (2003: 273).

<sup>31</sup> I was never actually observed a Thangmi *chewar*, in part due to bad timing, but also since it had not been thoroughly adopted by all families, which meant that there were in fact very few performances of it. This brief description is based on the VCD version as well as accounts from individuals who had participated in *chewar* rituals.

neologism. Families had to recite the *paloke* themselves without a guru's guidance, making the *chewar* perhaps the first ritual arena in which activists were able to publicly demonstrate their successful appropriation of originary power through the twin processes of scripturalization (see Chapter 3) and ritual invention. This process had occurred over the course of more than a decade; the 1992 OBC application did not mention the *chewar* at all, while the draft ST application materials that I saw in 2005 highlighted it as a distinctively Thangmi ritual. These assertions were backed up by the "videoalized" documentation of the ritual as conducted for the son of Laxmi, the dance choreographer introduced in Chapter 2 (the child was also the nephew of Basant, the BTWA General Secretary until 2003). As Laxmi showed me a copy of this VCD with obvious pride, she explained, "The *chewar* is so important to us now, it is the one tradition that people like me feel we can understand and do ourselves". The concept also made its way back to Nepal in the 2002 *Thami Samudaya* publication, which contains a set of stage direction-like instructions for how to conduct a *chewar* ritual (Samudaya 2061 [2056]: 68).

There was only one problem with promoting the *chewar* as an example of Thangmi ritual for political purposes: its similarity to Hindu practices, as well as to the *chewar* of other groups.<sup>32</sup> Unlike the OBC category, for which religion was not perceived to be diagnostic (and

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<sup>32</sup> Although there are elements associated with Hinduism in other Thangmi rituals, none are so similar in overall form as the *chewar* and the *nwaran*. The latter, however, was recuperable for ST purposes since gurus were still the officiants, giving the ritual a "shamanic" rather than "Hindu" tone despite its structural similarities.

indeed, the Thangmi OBC application had made repeated reference to the Hindu-influenced aspects of their practice), there was a growing sense that in order to be eligible for ST status, groups had to be able to demonstrate their unique, non-Hindu nature through performances. This was made explicit in the 2006 Cultural Research Institute review of ST aspirant groups, during which BTWA activist Shova told me that one of the verifiers had critiqued the Thangmi materials with the comment, “You must not ‘touch’ anything which has to do with the Hindu religion”.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, videoalized rituals turned out to be insufficient for the verifiers’ purposes; Shova reported them as saying, “Only ‘live’ will do”.<sup>34</sup> Latte Apa was thus called in at the last minute to demonstrate Thangmi ritual in practice before the verifiers—with the explicit instructions that all allusions to Hindu practice must be removed—and the *chewar* VCD was quietly slipped out of the Thangmi application package.

Despite their subjective feelings of success, and quite literally, empowerment, at having accessed originary power directly without a guru’s mediation through their practice of the *chewar*, activist attempts to package this power for the state failed due to the persistence of bureaucratic biases about what “tribal” culture should be. Contrary to the activists’ expectations, the state itself privileged practice (albeit enacted in a performative frame) over outright objectifications of it in

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<sup>33</sup> Original Nepali: *Tapai harule Hindu dharmako kura ‘touch’ garnu hundaina.*

<sup>34</sup> Original Nepali: *‘Live’ matrai chahinchha.*



text or video, and also privileged the figure of the guru over that of lay practitioners, thereby reifying precisely the form of power that activists hoped state recognition might ultimately help them subvert. The policies of a democratic, secular state which in theory were designed to “uplift the marginalized” regardless of their culture or religion were at once stymying activist attempts to democratize ritual power, and perpetuating the Hindu-tribe dichotomy.<sup>35</sup>

### *Becoming Thangmi at Marriage*

“Marriage is about bringing our community together. It’s about the bride and the groom and their families recognizing each other. The details don’t matter so much, it’s the way people feel that’s important.” Bir Bahadur and I were reviewing notes from a wedding ritual we had observed in Dolakha in early 2005, and in his role as research assistant, my friend was frustrated with my persistent questions about the literal meanings of the Thangmi language terms for each phase of the *bore* (T) ritual cycle (such as *sauti*, *ayu*, *cardam* and *seneva*). I was also fascinated by the symbolic meaning of each particular item, such as the *rapeng* (T), a dead frog placed on a wicker winnowing tray, along with several less unusual offerings, and suspended from the rafters of the groom’s house as his family’s lineage deities were propitiated. But Bir Bahadur was urging me to look at the big picture, to consider the purpose that marriage rituals served at the communal

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<sup>35</sup> See Middleton and Shneiderman (2008) for further discussion of these dynamics.

level, rather than fixating on the details of an idealized ritual form, which, as he reminded me, hardly existed. Unlike funerary rites, which followed a clear sequence that was remarkably similar from guru to guru and place to place, marriage rituals varied immensely according to location and historical juncture. Here I therefore consider the significance of marriage rituals in a more general social sense without presenting any particular ritual schema in full, whereas in the discussion of funerary rituals that follows below, I do the opposite.

The wedding that we had just observed in Dolakha, Bir Bahadur continued to explain, was part of a very recent trend in which gurus had agreed amongst themselves—in part due to encouragement from both NTS and BTWA activists—to return to a more “traditional” Thangmi ritual form which their predecessors had largely jettisoned several decades earlier in favor of a Hinduized ritual framework. The central acts of exchange through which the two families recognized each other and affirmed the couple’s clan identities (see Figure 7.2), along with a set of wedding songs performed to the beat of a *madal* drum, and the requisite consumption of alcohol had remained fairly constant elements over time. However, the celebratory idiom within which these actions were carried out had shifted, with symbolic items like dress, gifts, and food brought into line with pan-Nepali Hindu norms over the course of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Figure 7.3).



Figure 7.2 Groom's father and bride's mother exchanging flower garlands during a Thangmi wedding. Chokati, Sindhupalchok, Nepal, February 2008



Figure 7.3 Groom (Komin) and bride (Shanti) at the center of their wedding procession, both dressed in styles common across Nepal. Chokati, Sindhupalchok, Nepal, February 2008

According to oral histories, the immediate impetus behind the appropriation of Hindu ritual styles for Thangmi weddings was the fact that one of the primary offerings in the Thangmi marriage ritual cycle had been the hind quarter of a cow. The bride's family had to slaughter the animal as an indication that they accepted the initial offer of the groom's family, and cure the meat for consumption as part of the *sauti* (T; N: *koseli*) "engagement" ritual. The hind leg, however, was saved and displayed above the hearth until the marriage rituals were actually completed. This could take months, or in some cases, years. Around 2005 VS (1948 AD), in the waning days of Rana rule, a Thangmi *mizar* (N), from Suspa named Sure, who served as a liaison between the local community and the central government, was personally berated by an official from Kathmandu after he caught sight of a bovine leg suspended from the rafters of a Thangmi house during one of his rare visits to Dolakha. The official threatened to immediately arrest any one who so brazenly displayed evidence of breaking the law—since to kill a cow was a felony in the Hindu state of Nepal until 2006—and Sure sent a message out across the entire area that any such evidence should be immediately destroyed. In subsequent years, Sure led a campaign to transform marriage practices completely so that cow slaughter would not only no longer be necessary, but so that state representatives would not even entertain the suspicion that it might be. In its most extreme form, this objective entailed inviting Hindu pandits to conduct wedding rituals in place of Thangmi gurus.

This reformist agenda (which could perhaps be identified as an early instance of activism, although there was no formal organization to support it) drove a wedge between two community factions. On one side were those who supported Sure's plan on the basis that it would both protect the Thangmi from persecution, and improve their standing in the eyes of the Hindu state.<sup>36</sup> On the other side were those who decried it because they felt marriage rituals to be an essential expression of Thangminess, as well as a worthwhile act of resistance against the Hindu state. Although Sure's faction eventually won out and marriage practices were largely transformed, the contours of this social divide remained evident in Dolakha half a century later when I conducted fieldwork. Some people characterized Sure and his descendants as slippery social climbers who had taken on the unpleasant brahmanical features of the caste that they aspired to emulate, while others valorized Sure and his family as the savior of the Thangmi, whom otherwise would not have realized the backwards error of their ways. The former group, who seemed to be in the majority, had within a decade or so returned to using Thangmi gurus as the primary wedding officiants, but the context had already been substantially Hinduized in a manner that would only become more difficult to reverse as panchayat era policies further promoted such transformations along the path to nationalist modernity.

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<sup>36</sup> See W. Fisher (2001) for a detailed description of how Hindu practices were strategically adopted for similar purposes in the Thakali community.

This mix of Thangmi gurus chanting their *paloke* at otherwise Hindu-style weddings, which Bir Bahadur jokingly described in Nepali as *khachar biha*—“half-breed weddings”—was prevalent in most Thangmi areas of Nepal when I began my fieldwork. The common awareness of the historicity of the process through which this mix had become normalized as specifically Thangmi demonstrated another facet of synthetic subjectivity at work. The situation only began to change in the mid-2000s, as activists emboldened by a decade of *janajati* politics began urging gurus and families to “return” to their earlier forms of practice.<sup>37</sup> Still, there was a great diversity of opinion about the wisdom of this idea, and, even among those who were in favor of it, there was much debate about exactly how to implement it. Every one of the six weddings that I witnessed parts of therefore had a different balance of “old” and “new”, and it was often unclear which was which, or for whom. These inconsistencies troubled many activists, as well as young people and their families, when it came time to plan a wedding. Almost as a rule, when I asked laypeople about Thangmi marriage practices (or asked them to describe their own wedding), they expressed the opinion that agreeing upon a consistent set of marriage rituals should be a cultural priority for the NTS.

These concerns were also high on the BTWA agenda. Those Thangmi who migrated to India before Sure’s intervention in the late

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<sup>37</sup> Recall the activist writings valorizing *khami*—as guru are called in their wedding officiant role—as an example of “people who organize things at different levels of society”, and whose presence demonstrates the “completeness” of the Thangmi social system (Niko 2003: 45).

1940s might have brought knowledge of earlier marriage practices from Nepal with them, but if so, these were quickly subsumed by the generic Hindu-based pan-Nepali forms that developed in the multi-ethnic environment of the migrant community. BTWA leaders who had pinned their hopes of videoalizing a Thangmi wedding on circular migrants were disappointed when two workers were married in Darjeeling, and instead of evidence of a coherent, “original” ritual, the wedding (and therefore the video) contained a messy array of largely Hinduized practices. The activists then planned to videoalize what they called a “dramatization” of a traditional Thangmi wedding for their Scheduled Tribe application.<sup>38</sup> Some time later, they were pleased to discover that a group of circular migrants regularly gathered to play the *madal* and sing some of the old Thangmi language songs which were still played at weddings in Nepal—the migrants could sing these celebratory melodies even if they did not know much about the details of ritual practice per se. It was these songs which provided the inspiration for the musical style used on the *Amako Ashis* cassette, which in turn served as the soundtrack for the performance billed as a “wedding dance” that was described in Chapter 2. While the *chewar* was a suitable site for the exercise of a new kind of ritual power precisely because it had no history as a Thangmi practice, the long history of ritual mixture surrounding the “Thangmi wedding” allowed

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<sup>38</sup> I do not know whether this was ever accomplished or not, and if so, whether the final product was included in the final set of application materials, or later pulled out as the *chewar* VCD was.

multiple forms of power to stand, with each sub-group—whether defined by kinship, residence, loyalty to a guru, associational membership, or some other kind of affinity—moulding the ritual form to their particular needs.

Despite this diversity of form, at the most fundamental level, every wedding still required a guru to officiate. However, most gurus in both India and Nepal seemed surprisingly unconcerned with the debate over the ideal form of a Thangmi wedding. At first I thought that they had perhaps given up control over this particular domain so long ago that it was no longer a battle worth fighting. Later, I came to understand that despite their temporary displacement from the ritual process, they had never really ceded control of the underlying social power inherent in this moment of the life cycle at all. Even when Hindu priests were employed as ritual officiants, it was still gurus who had to be consulted about the issue of clan identity and the choice of proper marriage partners. Pandits from outside of the Thangmi community simply could not have access to this information; knowledge of the Thangmi clan system, and its living instantiations in the genealogies of prospective brides and grooms, was an ethnically and locally specific matter. So even at the height of Hinduized marriage practice, gurus were still called upon to investigate clan histories, pronounce partners marriageable, and oversee the *sauti*—a preliminary set of exchanges of alcohol and breads made of rice flour (which had eventually been substituted for the cow leg) between families—at which time which



clan affiliation was validated. Despite the otherwise great variation in ritual form, these simple preliminaries, and the gurus' role in orchestrating them, remained very similar in both Nepal and Darjeeling. This state of affairs lent credence to the assertion that whatever other purposes weddings might come to serve, their fundamental social function was to affirm the Thangminess of their protagonists by pronouncing their clan affiliation in public for the first time since birth, and in some cases, for the first time ever.

#### *"Conversion" to Thangminess*

It was during the *sauti* that those marriage partners who did not have a Thangmi clan name were assigned one by the guru, thereby receiving the seeds of Thangminess which could be brought to fruition through participation in future rituals, and ultimately in the transformation into an ancestor at death. For the most part, this category of "converts" was comprised by women from other ethnic backgrounds who married Thangmi men, but it also included smaller numbers of men who married Thangmi women. Thangmi residence patterns in all locations were generally patrilocal, but I documented several exceptions to this rule, where the man either resided with the woman's family, or the new couple set up their own household in an entirely different location (this was certainly the case for many migrant families who left both sets of parents behind in Nepal to settle in Darjeeling). In patrilocal marriages, a non-Thangmi woman always became Thangmi, but in either of the

latter two cases, a non-Thangmi man could “convert”, always through the assignment of a clan name.

From the very earliest days of migration to India, inter-group marriage was almost the norm for Thangmi in Darjeeling, as it was for most other groups of Nepali heritage. Indeed, if the Thangmi population was truly only 13 as listed in the 1872 census, it is hardly surprising that they began to marry people from other groups.

Genealogical work that I conducted with three Thangmi families in India who had been settled in Darjeeling for three, four and seven generations showed that about 75% of marriages over time were with non-Thangmi.<sup>39</sup> Marriage partners were from other groups of Nepali heritage, including Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Magar, Gurung, Newar, Bahun, and Chhetri; from other Indian communities, including Bengali, Bihari, Marwari and in one case Muslim; and in a surprisingly high number of cases, from *dalit* backgrounds.<sup>40</sup> In all of these marriages, women from other groups who married Thangmi men became Thangmi in the same

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<sup>39</sup> Based on fieldwork conducted in the early 1980s, Subba reports a 32% rate of what he calls “intercaste marriage” in Rangbull, a village on the outskirts of Darjeeling bazaar (1989: 69). This is a higher rate of intercaste marriage than in two successively more remote villages, in which 27% and 13.7% of marriage were intercaste respectively, leading Subba to suggest that intercaste marriage is higher in more urbanized areas. This may account in part for the much higher rates of intergroup marriage that I documented, since the majority of the Thangmi I worked with lived in urban areas. Other relevant factors include the 20 year time gap between Subba’s research and my own, and the fact that as described above, Thangmi are relatively unconcerned with issues of status and hierarchy and so do not rule out members of any group as potential marriage partners, so are likely to have a higher inter-group marriage rate than the more diverse group with whom Subba worked.

<sup>40</sup> Although some Thangmi individuals expressed reservations about choosing a dalit as a marriage partner in theory, the reality was that many prominent Darjeeling Thangmi had done so (including a BTWA office-holders and a well-regarded civil servant), and neither these individuals nor their children appeared to be stigmatized within the Thangmi community.

manner—by having a guru assign them a female clan name (which could be any clan except for their mother-in-law's) during the *sauti*—regardless of their ethnic or caste identity at birth. In this way at least, the ideal of Thangmi egalitarianism was realized through a lack of concern about hypogamy or hypergamy based on normative Hindu notions of caste-based status. Thangmi women who married men of other groups would generally take on their husband's ethnic identity, but many also retained a strong sense of Thangminess. This suggests that although one could gain Thangminess at marriage, one did not necessarily lose it by marrying outside the group.<sup>41</sup> As Sheela, the Gangtok BTWA secretary explained in answer to my question about why she was so involved with a Thangmi organization even though she had married a Bahun, “Naturally I am interested since the first name I had in my life was Thami”.<sup>42</sup>

Inter-group marriage rates were much lower in Nepal, where most Thangmi lived in ethnically homogenous areas. Comparable genealogical work in Nepal turned up only one instance of inter-group

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<sup>41</sup> I do not have comparative data about the ritual processes through which women (or men) of Thangmi origin are incorporated into other ethnic groups.

<sup>42</sup> Original Nepali: ‘*Naturally, mero ‘first’ nam Thami ho, tyasle garda mero ‘interest’ chha.*’ One might surmise that tribal politics provided some expedient reasons for such a choice for continued identification as Thangmi, but given the fact that Indian law only reckoned descent through the paternal line, and therefore Sheela’s two children would not be eligible for ST status even if the Thangmi received it, for her I believe the feeling of Thangminess was a deeply embedded subjective one. This was corroborated by the fact that she continued to keep ‘Thami’ as a hyphenated part of her full name (Sheela Thami-Dahal), as did several other women, rather than doing away with it as they might be expected to do upon marrying high-caste Hindus.

marriage prior to the present generation,<sup>43</sup> in which I was familiar with four cases, the partners in which did not appear to be stigmatized.<sup>44</sup> In one case, a Newar man lived with his wife's Thangmi family; in the other three cases, Chhetri (Binita the school teacher, as described above), Tamang and Gurung women lived with their husband's families as Thangmi. As Binita explained, "Before our marriage Guru Maila gave me my Thangmi clan name. In the community I came from, women do not have their own names. It felt very special, and still I think about that name every day."

Indeed, women who had become Thangmi by marriage in both Nepal and India were often hyper-aware of their clan names, and talked about them openly in public. This habit had the opposite effect of that intended, since it diverged sharply from the mannerism of other Thangmi women, who would almost never mention their clan names except in ritual contexts. For instance, the wife of the BTWA secretary Rajen, who identified as Chhetri by birth (although her mother was Rai), greeted every participant who came through the door at a BTWA-sponsored event by introducing herself by her Thangmi clan name and asking each newcomer theirs. Many of the Thangmi migrants from

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<sup>43</sup> It may well be the case that people in previous generations who married non-Thangmi may have made the decision to settle in India on that basis, since despite Thangmi flexibility about these issues, in broader social terms Nepal was a more challenging place for inter-ethnic couples to live. This has changed to some extent in recent years, particularly in urban areas, but inter-group marriage is still not the acceptable norm in Nepal that it is in Darjeeling.

<sup>44</sup> My suspicion is that inter-ethnic marriages are becoming increasingly common as young Thangmi spend more time in Kathmandu, Charikot, Bahrabise and other urban centers for education, but I do not yet have data to support this.

Nepal who attended this event were clearly uncomfortable with her affect, since although not secret, in their experience, clan names were not used casually in social interactions like this. This recent convert's novel use of clan names simultaneously highlighted both her Thangminess and her non-Thangminess in a paradoxical manner.

Although perhaps discomfiting to some at a visceral level, the fact that this woman possessed both qualities at once could not be construed as contradictory within the ideological framework of an ethnicity, which, as we may recall from Chapter 3, defines itself by reference to the multiple levels of mixture (religious, racial, linguistic) at its core. In Darjeeling in particular, most people who called themselves Thangmi, and were involved in seeking recognition from the state on that basis, in fact had mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers and uncounted other relatives who were “actually” something else.<sup>45</sup> This reality of mixture—which was equally the case for most people in Darjeeling, regardless of what ethnic name they held and which organization they joined (if any)—was living proof that pan-Nepali nationalist ideology had worked, and should have provided a powerful challenge to legal classificatory rubrics that emphasized ethnic distinctiveness and boundedness. Unlike gurus, who had long used the mixture invoked in their *paloke* to challenge hegemonic ideas

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<sup>45</sup> Regardless of subjective attachments that individuals might have to their mother's identities, the Indian legal recognition of paternal descent alone meant that for most individuals, maternal rather than paternal identities became “other”. Clearly, this legal definition of paternal descent is at odds with Thangmi notions of parallel descent. I hope to address this issue in detail in the future.

about ethnic purity in village Nepal, however, activists were not yet emboldened enough to use their cultural resources to challenge state-supported notions of tribal distinctiveness in India, and instead sought to modify their myths to meet the perceived demands of the state.

In crafting an alternative platform for recognition, activists might have started with a portion of the origin myth that we have not yet examined, which demonstrates how people from hybrid backgrounds might be integrated into the Thangmi social world.

When the brothers went to reclaim their arrows, they found a female child in the woods. She was the daughter of a forest spirit (T: *apan*; N: *ban manche*). They took her back with them and she joined the family, becoming the eighth sister...

There was no one for her to marry, so she went to sit in meditation retreat in a cave. The Dolakha king heard that there was a woman sitting alone in the jungle from his royal hunters, and he requested that they bring this woman to him. He liked her, so he put his previous wife in a different house and married this Thangmi woman. After some time, the Thangmi brothers went to check on their sister in the cave, but to their surprise she was gone. They suspected the king, so they went to look for their sister in Dolakha. They did a funny dance with costumes and instruments to attract her attention, wherever she might be. She saw them out of the palace window, but told them not to touch her because she was pregnant with the king's child. But eventually they convinced her to leave, and she came back to live with them in Suspa. Later she gave birth to twin boys, who became the first of the *roimirati* clan.<sup>46</sup>

This eighth daughter, who does not appear in all versions of the myth, is given the clan name *apan siri*—"respected forest spirit". In this way, she is brought into the Thangmi fold, but only to leave again to marry a Newar king. However, she does not "become" Newar as we might

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<sup>46</sup> As recounted by Rana Bahadur.

expect, nor do her children; instead they all return to live as Thangmi, with the two sons becoming the primogenitors of two sub-clans within the overarching *roimirati* clan. *Roimi* means “Newar”, and *rati* is used interchangeably in Thangmi with *jati*, so *roimirati* means simply “the Newar group”.<sup>47</sup> This clan continues to be well-represented all across the Thangmi world, and until very recently played a special ritual role in the Devikot–Khadga Jatra annual rituals that will be described in Chapter 8. Many members of the *roimirati* clan, such as the political activist and ritual lineage-holder Gopilal, are proud of what they view as their Newar heritage. Newars do not, however, recognize Thangmi *roimirati* as part of their community, despite the fact that the clan’s forefather was supposedly a Newar king. In short, this part of the myth provides a script for dealing with hybrid members—whether daughters of forest spirits or sons of Newar kings—by incorporating them through the creation and assignment of new clan names which underscore, rather than conceal, their hybrid origins.

### *Becoming a Thangmi Ancestor*

There is little between marriage and death in one’s own life cycle to mark it as particularly Thangmi; there are no rituals surrounding

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<sup>47</sup> In Dolakha the term *roimirati* can also be used to refer to the offspring of more recent unions between Newar men and Thangmi women. In Sindhupalchok, however, a distinction is made between members of the original *roimirati* clan and present-day children of such liaisons, the latter being called *nagarkoti*. See also Holmberg (1989: 70) who attests to similar usage of this term among Tamang to refer to children of Newar men and Tamang women.

pregnancy, for instance, or the attainment of a certain age.<sup>48</sup> But this does not mean that life is ritually empty. Rather, participating in other people's life cycle rituals affords ample opportunities to fully realize one's own Thangminess.

Funeral rituals provide the most fulsome context in which to do this, in large part because they are not contested in the way that all of the other rituals described in this chapter have been. The ritual sequence has a built-in provision for flexibility regarding certain pragmatic details (in the form of a myth, recited at the conclusion of every *mumptra*, that details the ritual's own transformation over time), and this is perhaps part of what has allowed it to be so enduring, with relatively consistent structure and content across time and place.<sup>49</sup> Recall that the first ever Thangmi association, the Bhai Larke Thami Samaj, was founded in 1943 for the express purpose of organizing *mumptra* for its members, which suggests that there is a high degree of historical continuity in this ritual's importance as a key identity practice.

In the ethnographic present, participation in the funerary rites of one's family and friends was generally recognized as a diagnostic feature of Thangminess. The exceptions to this proved the rule: one family in a rural area of Darjeeling district was infamous for using lamas to part with their dead in a Buddhist style, while the Tumsong

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<sup>48</sup> For example, the Newar *bura janko*, Hindu *chaurasi puja* or Tibetan Buddhist *thar chang*.

<sup>49</sup> Detailed descriptions of the Thangmi *mumptra* are also found in Chhetri (n.d.) and Sapkota (2045 VS).



tea plantation family employed Hindu pandits, and some recent converts to Christianity in Nepal expressed an oppositional identity by abstaining from even the *mumpra* of their own immediate relatives.<sup>50</sup> These choices for alternative death rituals were routinely invoked by others (in the gossip of circular migrants, the speeches of activist leaders, and the rhetoric of gurus) as evidence that the individuals involved had lost or were losing their Thangminess. In Nepal, such doubt was generally expressed in the idiom of breaking kinship bonds—“if his faith does not allow him come to our father’s *mumpra*, he cannot be our brother any longer”—while in Darjeeling such choices were seen as a break in political ranks. In one case that I followed, the BTWA officers temporarily refused to give a recommendation letter for an OBC certificate to a member of a family who had not employed a guru for a recent *mumpra*, but this decision was reversed when the individual appealed with the argument that she had not been in control of that familial decision. At one Darjeeling *mumpra*, a mourning son’s request to “call a lama for a conference with our gurus” about the best way to conduct the funerary rites for his father was met with disdain by his brothers, who reprimanded their brother for challenging the guru’s authority in public, and thereby challenging their entire family’s reputation as Thangmi.

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<sup>50</sup> For instance, Rana Bahadur’s youngest son (who had previously trained as a guru with his father) refused to participate in his father’s *mumpra* after he converted to Christianity.

Perhaps these powerful feelings arose in the context of the *mumptra* because, “the issue of death throws into relief the most important cultural values by which people live their lives and evaluate their experiences” (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 25), or because “the community in its enduring aspect is constructed by reference to the dead” (Bloch and Parry 1982: 36). For the Thangmi, this was quite literally so, since the underground world of the ancestors to which spirits were dispatched through the *mumptra* was what anchored the soil upon which living Thangmi walked in their everyday lives. To question the efficacy of the Thangmi *mumptra* was to question the very potential for Thangmi social reproduction itself by negating the process through which Thangmi territory was constructed through the bodies of the ancestors. As described in Chapters 4 and 6, this territory and its stone symbols (the household *bampa* and the Suspa Bhumethan) had quite different valences within the ideological constructions of Thangminess in India and Nepal, but ultimately Thangmi territory was a sacred object for one and all. By embedding ancestral bodies in the land, the *mumptra* was the process through which individual souls became part of the communal sacred, and thereby the best link the living had to originary power. Moreover, as a paradigmatic synthetic ritual which seamlessly integrated elements associated with both Buddhist and Hindu practice within a distinctively Thangmi framework (legitimated as such by the figure of the guru as officiant, and the clan affiliations of the participants), it expressed in

ritual form the ideology of synthesis that underlay Thangmi subjectivity at multiple levels.

For the vast majority of Thangmi who did employ guru to conduct *mumpra*, there was therefore not much debate over what the core ritual should entail. This was the event at which gurus most visibly demonstrated their powers, and even the most militant activists did not meddle with their mastery over ritual form during the actual practice of a *mumpra*—although they might seek to scripturalize components of it for later use.<sup>51</sup> Early in my fieldwork, the one major difference that I noted between *mumpras* in Nepal and India was that in the former context, the funerary ritual cycle had three major phases, while in the latter only two were observed. In both locations, the same series of practices were repeated immediately after cremation and then 13 days after death, while in Nepal they were repeated another time in between on the third day after death.<sup>52</sup> This intermediate *mumpra* was called the black (T: *kiji*) or minor (T: *ocyana*) *mumpra*, and in India it had been condensed into the single major (T: *jekha*) *mumpra* which

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<sup>51</sup> *Nan Ni Patuko* offers a brief overview of the ritual and part of the *gardul puran* (T) tale that is told at the end of the *mumpra* (Patuko 1997: 22–23). *Thami Samudaya* offers a more detailed schematic description of the ritual process, again in the style of instructions, which match well with what I observed take place in process on multiple occasions. The last line of the description states that the *cheti* (T), the woven mat on which offerings are placed during the *mumpra*, is “a unique identifier of the Thami community” (Samudaya 2061 [2056] VS: 85–92).

<sup>52</sup> Small children under five are buried in a special corner of the *mosandanda* instead of being cremated. Some guru claim that Thangmi once buried their adult dead as well, but if this is the case the practice ceased long ago, since it was not known to have occurred in living memory.

was conducted 13 days after the cremation.<sup>53</sup> The actual ritual sequence was exactly the same for the minor and major *mumpra*, it was just a question of whether this sequence was repeated once or twice. The minor *mumpra* had long ago been dropped in India because most Thangmi were involved in wage labor there and could not afford to lose the additional time—as described in Chapter 5, it was difficult enough to raise the funds and participants for a single day-long ritual. Over the course of my fieldwork, many Thangmi in Nepal began to adopt the shorter ritual form common in India, as greater numbers of Thangmi began doing wage labor closer to home as well. While I had observed two minor *mumpras* in the late 1990s, by the mid-2000s they were becoming equally uncommon in Nepal. Hertz suggests that such condensations of ritual time are fairly common, and that they do not necessarily indicate diminished efficacy (2004[1907]: 200).

In the ritual description that follows, I provide an overall sense of the process by drawing upon my observations of ten *mumpras* between 1999 and 2005 in various parts of Nepal and India, as well as further explanations of them elicited from gurus and laypeople. I argue that in its particular framing of the “homologies such as cosmological space::geographical space::local space::domestic space::bodily space (Bickel and Gaenszle 1999: 13), and, I would add, ethnic space, the Thangmi *mumpra* integrates a range of ritual orientations that have

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<sup>53</sup> This particular timing was a relatively recent adjustment to Hindu norms; according to gurus and older lay informants, a generation ago all jekha *mumpra* were conducted only in the Nepali month of Pus (January–February), regardless of when the person died.

been classified as “tribal”, “Indic”, and “Tibetan” (Blondeau and Steinkellner 1996; Blondeau 1998; Bickel and Gaenszle 1999). At the level of discourse, contemporary Thangmi engaged in the process of defining themselves vis-à-vis state classification systems also struggle with the fact that these elements appear to “belong” to separate religious traditions. At the level of practice, however, these elements have long been closely interwoven, and synthetic engagement with them as *mumpra* participants in fact generates a strong sense of belonging to a Thangmi religious tradition in the holistic sense. In such situations, national discourses that equate ethnic distinctiveness with religious singularity render invisible groups like the Thangmi whose “tribal” nature is in fact premised on mixture in practice.

My description and analysis refers to Hertz’s classic work on death rituals, as well as Metcalf and Huntington’s more recent extension of Hertz’s insights. In particular, Thangmi funerary rites follow the pattern of temporary burial as elucidated by Hertz, in which cremation, “far from destroying the body of the deceased ... recreates it and makes it capable of entering a new life” (2004[1907]: 202). The subsequent reconstruction of the body with various food items provides a means of both dispatching the individual spirit, and validating Thangminess at the communal level. As Hertz explained, “It is the action of society on the body that gives full reality to the imagined drama of the soul” (2004[1907]: 210).

### *Ritual Actors*

There are four primary sets of actors involved in the *mumpra*. The first group is the *kiryaputri* (N), the sons and brothers of the deceased.<sup>54</sup> Thangmi *kiryaputri* must observe several ritual taboos which they share with their caste-Hindu counterparts, including those on the consumption of meat and salt, and any dancing or singing. More interesting than these generic taboos are another set of ritual prohibitions that emphasize the local boundaries of the funerary rites, and their integral role in defining Thangmi identity. The oldest son, or otherwise senior *kiryaputri*, must abide by the following injunctions for the period of time between the death and the *mumpra*:<sup>55</sup> he cannot cross a river, he cannot sleep anywhere but in his own house, and he cannot speak with people from any other ethnic group. The integrity of the ritual process as a Thangmi-only affair occurring on Thangmi territory is established from the outset through these imperatives to maintain the boundaries of both geographical and ethnic space. In Darjeeling, the first two taboos are upheld, but the last one must usually be interpreted flexibly, since given the high rates of inter-ethnic residence described above, close friends and neighbors who

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<sup>54</sup> There is no Thangmi language term for this, or many other ritual concepts, and Nepali terms are used instead. The names of the items used to reconstruct the body of the deceased are the major exception to this rule, as described below. For a definition of *kiryaputri* and other Nepali terms in the Brahmanical Hindu context, see Michaels (1999).

<sup>55</sup> In cases where the minor *mumpra* is performed three days after death, these taboos are lifted after that first ritual sequence, but if, as is more common now, only the major *mumpra* is performed 13 days after death, the taboos must be observed until that time.

want to be involved in the event are often from other ethnic groups. Latte Apa reinterpreted the ethnic taboo in geographical terms by instructing mourners not to speak with anyone who did not live within the immediate vicinity of the deceased's house, but he also explicitly reminded the participants that this was a deviation from the original necessitated by the pragmatic reality of life in Darjeeling.

The second actor is the *kutumba* (N), whom, according to the Thangmi definition of the term, must be a male out-clan member from one of the six clan groups other than that of the deceased.<sup>56</sup> Often this role is played by a *damari* (T; N: *jvai*; son-in-law or husband of younger sister) or *jarphu* (N: *bhenajyu*; husband of elder sister), but this role may also be played by any other out-clan member who is not directly related to the deceased.<sup>57</sup> The *celibeti* (N), or immediate female relatives of the deceased, also play a prominent role. Throughout the ritual cycle, they are responsible for arranging and bringing *syandang* (T), the primary food offerings for the deceased.

Last but not least are the *gurus* who officiate from the point of death through the end of the funerary rites. Often, a senior guru like Rana Bahadur, Guru Maila, or Latte Apa will be accompanied by three or four younger *gurus* in training, who help gather the diverse array of

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<sup>56</sup> Turner's definition suggests that Nepali usage of the word *kutumba* is similar, although slightly different in scope: "Family, relations, esp. relatives of daughter's husband" (Turner 1997 [1931]: 96).

<sup>57</sup> The Thangmi do not fit the pattern described by Oppitz for both the Magar and Gurung in which the death ritual largely serves to cement affinal ties by assigning the bulk of the ritual work to the deceased's son-in-law (1982). Since the Thangmi do not practice matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, which is the partial prerequisite for Oppitz's model, this is not overly surprising.

items needed for ritual offerings and construct these while the senior guru chants his *paloke*. Together, they are responsible for managing the transformations of the body as it is disposed of, reconstructed, and ultimately attached to the land as an ancestor.

### *The Funeral Procession*

After a tiger's bone horn (T: *mirkang*)<sup>58</sup> is blown by the acting *kutumba* to announce the death, the family and other ritual actors gather at the home of the deceased. A bier (T: *marangseng*) to carry the body is made out of two bamboo or wood sticks (T: *kapa*), and three supports of bamboo or wood are attached to the bier at the level of the corpse's feet, chest, and forehead, which are considered the definitive points of the body. In the past, the corpse was usually tied on to the bier with a rope of Himalayan nettle (T: *nangai*; N: *allo*; *Girardinia diversifolia*).<sup>59</sup> In contemporary practice, the corpse is usually tied with *babiyo* (N; *Ischaemum angustifolium*) or with strips of fabric torn from a white cummerbund. Guru stress the importance of securing the corpse with a cord of natural materials rather than the plastic ropes and twine now available. The presence of a synthetic material would interfere with the body's reintegration with the land, a prerequisite for the spirit's timely departure.

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<sup>58</sup> This is sometimes replaced by a conch shell (N: *sankha*) in both Nepal and India.

<sup>59</sup> Latin terms are cited from Turin (2003).



Before the funeral procession begins, small amounts of husked and unhusked rice are arranged as offerings on leaf plates, and placed in a small home-made wooden bowl (T: *toke*). A tool is placed on top of the rice—a knife for a man or a sickle for a woman—and the entire offering bowl is placed on a bamboo tray (T: *lembe*).<sup>60</sup> The corpse bearers (T: *guthimi*) will carry this tray as they walk, along with a hoe, altered so that the blade faces the opposite direction from its normal placement,<sup>61</sup> and an axe to cut the firewood for the cremation. Two small flags of white cloth are attached to bamboo poles and carried ahead of the corpse. These will be used to mark the head and foot of the body after its cremation and absorption into the land.

Now the procession prepares to set off from the house to the cremation ground, called the *mosandanda* (T), meaning “ridge of the spirits”. Each Thangmi settlement in Nepal has its own *mosandanda*, usually located in the forest at an uninhabited high point above the village. The preference for a high point is not dictated by a belief that the hill itself is the abode of a deity, or that high points are believed to be closer to the sky/heaven/deities, as has been detailed for many Rai communities (cf. Gaenzsle 1999, Forbes 1998). Rather, guru explain

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<sup>60</sup> This is one of a number of gender markers found throughout the ritual. Men usually carry knives, whereas women carry sickles for their field work, and the associated tool travels with them in death.

<sup>61</sup> Such inversions are a common feature of death rituals throughout the Himalayas. Allen tells us that in Thulung Rai death rites, “the dead man is told forcibly to depart to where he belongs, to the village of the ancestors. The sharpness of separation is expressed by reversal of the orientations that he has obeyed while alive” (1972: 86). Gaenzsle describes the phenomenon among the Mewahang Rai, explaining that “symbolic inversions of the ordinary world signal that the deceased is no longer part of it ... (1999: 56).

the preference as a practical choice: the only uninhabited areas are found above villages, and since it is essential that the ritual be conducted in a place where the land can be donated, in fact deeded, to the deceased, it cannot be land belonging to anyone else. In recent years, many of the *mosandanda* in rural Nepal have been recognized as *dharmik ban* (N: religious forests)—by the state, and are thereby protected from encroachment. Each of the seven male Thangmi clans has its own designated area on the *mosandanda*, and the corpse must be burned in the appropriate location (see Figure 7.4). Women are now cremated in the space designated for their husband's clan; it is not clear whether they may once have had separate cremation sites.



Figure 7.4 One of seven cremation platforms at the newly refurbished *mosandanda* in Suspa–Kshamawati VDC, Dolakha, Nepal, March 2007

In the more densely populated, multi-ethnic urban setting of Darjeeling, such exclusive cremation grounds are an impossibility. Thangmi cremate their dead at government-built concrete shelters available at the outskirts of each settlement. This means that guru must conduct an additional set of preliminary chants which first sanctify this public place as particularly Thangmi, and then as the appropriate cremation site for the clan of the deceased. In so doing, gurus invoke the attributes of *mosandanda* as found in Thangmi villages in Nepal, just as they make reference to the Suspa Bhume when consecrating new Bhume shrines in Darjeeling (see Chapter 6). In this way, despite the geographical distances between the two locations, the ancestral territory in which bodies are embedded are ritually continuous.



Figure 7.5 A funeral procession stops to make offerings at a crossroads under Latte Apa's guidance, Rangbull, Darjeeling, January 2005

A conch shell is blown to announce the procession to the cremation site. As the large group of mourners and hangers-on slowly walks up the hill, the corpse bearers throw roasted unhusked rice (T: *layo* < N: *laya*) at each crossroads (see Figure 7.5). The corpse's head must face forward as it is carried. At the base of the *mosandanda*, or just in front of the concrete shelter, the corpse bearers dig thrice in the ground with the inverted hoe, and the *layo* is offered over the hole. The corpse is paraded around this hole three times counter-clockwise, and as it completes its final circumambulation, the corpse is turned so that the feet are now facing forward for the remainder of the journey. This journey to the top of the hill has parallels in the Magar and Gurung processions to cremation or interment places (cf. Oppitz 1982; Pettigrew 1999). However, in the Thangmi situation, the journey does not refer to a historical point of origin or other cosmological voyage. It takes place within known territory, on paths which the participants walk every day of their lives. The processional route must be marked out as temporary ritual territory by scattering grains at each intersection, an action which attaches literal importance to the earth that is trodden upon. Ann Armbrrecht Forbes describes a similar pattern of temporary sacrality in the Yamphu Rai community: "... trees, rocks, mountains become sacred when incorporated into metaphorical journeys that re-enact the travels of the ancestors. Once the journeys are over, the places are no longer sacred" (1998: 111). In the Yamphu case, however, the funeral procession is linked to the collective mytho-

historical “journey of the ancestors”, while for the Thangmi each funeral procession stands as an inherently effective practice event in the present.

*Cremation: Attaching the Body to the Land*

The procession now reaches the cremation site, where a funeral pyre is built. Six *thurmi* are planted in the ground in two parallel lines, defining the area where the corpse is to be burnt. The finely carved image of a guru’s *thurmi* will be familiar from the discussion in Chapter 3 in which it comes to serve as a symbol of Thangmi identity for the BTWA. Here, by contrast, the nails are rough-hewn pieces of wood which will be burnt in the crematory fire, and in themselves have little symbolic value; it is the work that they effect—pinning the body to the land—that is important. On top of these stakes, a wooden platform of seven layers is built with thin strips of overlapping wood. The corpse is paraded around the structure three times, and the tiger bone horn or conch shell is blown. A small fire (T\*: *rojeme*) is made some distance from the corpse, and from this three torches are lit. One *kiryaputri* places a torch at the corpse’s head, and another places one at the corpse’s feet. The last torch is placed at the corpse’s chest by the *kutumba*. An entire small tree called *chyatamarang* (T\*) is placed on the pyre and burned with the corpse.

The act of “pinning down” the body at once suggests both a “body-based” concept of spatiality that invokes the “Indic” concept of

the mandala to establish links between the body and the cardinal directions (Bickel and Gaenszle 1999: 19),<sup>62</sup> and a “tribal” version of this, which, “is based on territorial notions (e.g. sacred mountains) that are largely absent in the traditional Indic conception” (Bickel and Gaenszle 1999: 19). Janet Gyatso outlines the archetypal Tibetan myth of a demoness’ subjugation by “horizontal crucifixion”—attachment to the land by a series of nails (Gyatso 1987)—through which her body parts (liver, bones, blood, hair, etc) become embodied in local geographical features. Versions of this story are found throughout the Tibetan and Himalayan world;<sup>63</sup> a Thangmi take on it in which the body of the demon Madhukaite (also known as Markepapa) becomes embedded in local territory was presented Chapter 6 as part of the Bhume *paloke*. Wherever a variation of this story is told, corporeality provides an orienting structure for notions of directionality and location, with the local landscape perceived as pieces of the demonic body.

The Thangmi practice of “pinning down” a corpse before cremation occurs on a more local, human scale, but the effect is similar. As we shall see below, the piece of ground to which the corpse is attached adopts the features of the body itself, at the same time as

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<sup>62</sup> Bickel and Gaenszle contrast this body-based notion of spatiality to what they call the “geomorphic” spatiality common among Kiranti groups (Bickel and Gaenszle 1999: 17), in which space is ordered according to directional notions derived from mountainous geography, rather than the human body. The Thangmi language demonstrates evidence of both geomorphic and homomorphic forms of spatial ordering (Turin personal communication).

<sup>63</sup> See also Ramble (2008).

the physical body is believed to become part of this territory. Although the corpse lays claim to only one small piece of land demarcated by the six wooden stakes, the concept of embodied land is abstracted and the physical earth and the underworld in general are conceptualized not only as the realm of the ancestors, but as physically constructed by their bodies. What better way to feel like one belongs than by laying claim to territory by linking it to the bodies of one's ancestors?

Thangmi laypeople sometimes use the Hindu idiom of *sworga* (N)—“heaven”, with all of its skyward implications—to describe the final destination of the spirit after death, but the ritual chants used to dispose of the body and dispatch the spirit focus on the underworld. This is not conceptualized as a Judeo-Christian hell, but as a subterranean spirit world where the marginalized position of the Thangmi in the above-ground human world is reversed. As Latte Apa once explained:

The deities hid all of our sacred objects underground. That is why the ancestors must go there, so that they can finally use them. It is their territory, our real Thangmi territory. This is why Thangmi history is so unknown, because nothing is obvious aboveground.

Perhaps this valorization of the underworld was part of what made it possible for inhabitants of Khaldó Hotel (described in Chapter 4) to rationalize the difficulties of their daily existence.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately I was not able to pose direct questions about this.

### *Reconstructing the Body*

In the next segment of the *mumptra*, we encounter a set of practices which invokes, “a recurrent theme in Hindu religious thought ... the homology which is held to exist between the body and the cosmos” (Parry 1994: 30). This inverts the Tibetan concept in which the body is embedded in territory by suggesting that “all the gods and the whole of space are present within the human body” (Parry 1994: 30).<sup>65</sup> Before the corpse is completely reduced to ashes, one piece of flesh is removed and offered to the spirit as it leaves its body, along with the leftover unhusked and cooked rice, the knife or sickle, and the wooden handle of the hoe that had been turned backwards. Called *sikitip* (T), the last bit of flesh represents the body of the deceased itself and forms the focal point of the next part of the ritual cycle back at the deceased’s house. After the cremation is completed, two flags are placed at the head and foot of the funeral pyre.

All of the participants return down the hill following the exact route they used to climb it, and bathe in the nearest river or water tap. The officiating guru follows at the end of the procession and is the last to bathe. As he bathes, he chants: “The deceased’s spirit is under the earth, the spirits of the living are above the earth,” a phrase that recurs throughout the entire ritual cycle. After washing, the group returns to

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<sup>65</sup> Parry continues to explain that this notion is “explicitly elaborated in the *Garuda Purana* (part 15), to which the Banaras sacred specialists continually refer” (1994: 30). The Thangmi *mumptra* concludes with a reference to this text. However, the ritual segment that Thangmi guru refer to as the *gardul puran* does not match the content of the actual *Garuda Purana* text, while the earlier ritual segment known as the *sikitipko bhakha* has some narrative overlap with the *Garuda Purana*.



the base of the *mosandanda* or the cremation shelter, where at the outset of the procession a hole had been dug with the inverted hoe. There branches of thorny plants are collected to fill up the hole. This prevents the spirit from returning to the world of the living from the high funeral pyre, and encourages it to accept the transformations its body has undergone.

Then the entire group returns to the deceased's house, where the gurus conduct the *sikitipko bhakha* (T). In the next ritual phase the spirit of the deceased will be transferred from the *sikitip* to an assemblage of foodstuffs out of which its body is reconstructed. Until the body is properly honored and is led through the process of regeneration as part of the earth itself, the spirit of the deceased remains improperly in the land of the living. It is the status of the body itself which determines the location of the spirit, or as Metcalf and Huntington rephrase Hertz's original insight, "the fate of the body is a model for the fate of the soul" (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 34). Until the body is ritually transformed into a feature of the local landscape, the spirit cannot depart. Until that time, it hangs around in domestic space, inhabiting various parts of the house like the base of the stairs (T: *calipole*), the base of the millstone (T: *yantepole*), the base of the doorframe (T: *kharoupole*), the base of the hearth (T: *thapupole*), and the rooftop (N: *dhuri*). In the days between death and the final funeral rite, small offerings of rice must be made in these places to feed the spirit. The rites conducted in later phases of the cycle embody the

spirit in different objects, ultimately a chicken, in which form it may finally depart from the land of the living. Each of these successive embodiments emphasizes a different component part of the soul, all of which are simultaneously present in the living, but which must be dispatched separately in death. Gurus used the analogy of peeling away the layers of an onion to describe this ritual process.

The process of reconstructing the body with foodstuffs that double as offerings to the deceased occurs repeatedly throughout the ritual cycle, and stands as one of the most prominent features of the entire process.<sup>66</sup> Two long pieces of wood (T\*: *ulang seng*) are placed parallel to each other on the ground. On top of these a bamboo mat (T: *cheti*; T\*: *elebethere*) is built, always eight by eight strips square. A large, flat “funeral leaf”, or *mumpra aja* (T) is placed upside down on top of the bamboo mat. Ground millet flour is sprinkled on top of the leaves. All of the other collected items are placed on top (see Figure 7.6). The chicken which will eventually embody the spirit is also procured at this time, shown to the assembled guests, and then put away until the final funeral rite some days later.

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<sup>66</sup> The funerary rituals of many other Himalayan ethnic groups are notable for their emphasis on effigies of the deceased (cf. Ramble 1982 on Tibetan communities of Mustang, and Oppitz 1982 on the Magar). Descriptions of Thakali (Vinding 1982) and Newar (Gellner 1992) funerary rites mention body reconstructions with food items, but as ritual components of minor importance compared with the effigy, which remains the primary marker of the deceased. In the Thangmi rite, no effigy exists other than this assemblage of foodstuffs, which highlights again the direct correlation between the body and the land via natural products directly linked to body parts rather than through a more abstract “human-like” representation. In this regard, the Thangmi process of reconstructing the body appears more like the orthodox Hindu “refinement of the body” described by Parry in Banaras (1994: Chapter 6) than anything else.



Figure 7.6 Latte Apa and his colleagues begin chanting, with the *mumpra* offerings laid out on leaves atop bamboo mats. Rangbull, Darjeeling, January 2005

Then the gurus begin their chants, first recounting what has already occurred at the ridge-top cremation ground. The entire ritual is described, and the relationship between body and land is finally made explicit. The spirit is reminded that it has been granted a piece of land, the very same piece of land which it has become:

This offering has now been given.  
Now that piece of land [as defined by thurmi] has been put aside  
for you. Isn't that so?

On this small piece of land, a flag has also been planted where  
your forehead was. Isn't that so?

And at your feet another flag has been planted. Yes now,  
And on this piece of land a seed has also been planted.  
And cooked rice and vegetables have been placed on your pillow.  
Isn't that so?

The spirits of the dead are under the ground, the spirits of the  
living are exposed above the ground but are contemptible in  
comparison. Isn't that so?

Now we have arrived at the house of the funeral rites, so listen to this melody of the sikitip.

Through this melody of the sikitip now your body has become one with the mud of the earth.

Your body has become one with the rocks. Isn't that so?

From above you have become one with the trees and seedlings, now you have become one with the weeds and bushes of the jungle. Isn't that so? The spirit of death that killed you, don't send it to us.

Once the body has been disposed of and integrated into the land, the focus shifts to reconstructing the body with food items, each identified with a specific part of the body.<sup>67</sup> These items are all products of the fertile soil into which the deceased's body has been integrated, and therefore can be used to regenerate a new "body" inseparable from the land itself. This body then serves as the conduit through which the spirit can be escorted away from the land of the living. All of the food items are brought forward and offered on a *mumpra aja*, and the chant continues:

The pieces of wood below are your shinbones, so come. Having said that these are your shinbones, come. Yes now.

From the bamboo mat all of your ribs have been made, so come. Yes now.

Having made these funeral leaves your skin, come. Yes now.

From the flour is made all of your fat, so come! Yes now.

From the soybeans are made your eyes, so come! Yes now.

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<sup>67</sup> Kashinath Tamot has informed me that a substantial number of these body-part terms in Thangmi ritual language have cognates in the early classical Newar language (personal communication). See also Turin (2004a) on Thangmi/Newar lexical correspondences and Shneiderman (2002) for a detailed list of the Thangmi and Nepali names of each food item used in the *mumpra*.

From the upside down breads are made your two ears, so come!  
Yes now.

From the corn is made all of your teeth, so come! Yes now.

Now having made these ritual offerings, from the yams are made  
your brain, so come! Yes now.

Having made your kidneys in the name of the grain balls, come!  
Yes now.

From one of the upside down breads is made your spleen, so  
come! Yes now.

From the rice ball is also made your heart, so come! Yes now.

Don't say this isn't enough, don't get angry. Yes now.

Since we have made these offerings to you, spirit, don't send us  
other death spirits. Yes now.

After reconstructing the body, the gurus call the spirits of the  
dead to the feast. The spirits are invited to eat as well, so as to protect  
the living from their wrath. The ritual then concludes with the following  
lines, and nothing more is done until the *mumpra* several days later:

Your sons have been sitting here, your daughter-in-laws are also  
sitting here. Isn't that so?

If these things alone were not enough, we have pledged this  
small piece of land in your name. Isn't that so? . . .

Don't say anything, don't do anything (against us). Yes now . . .

From the hand of the *lama bonpo* food has been provided on an  
upside down leaf. Isn't that so?

Having done as such now, the *lama bonpo's* melody is finished.  
Yes now . . .

With the long hand make offerings (T\*: *sawo*), with the short  
hand offer salutes (T\*: *nothio*). Yes now.

Throughout the day's recitation, the themes of territoriality and embodiment are revisited a number of times. As the ritual comes to a close, the spirit is expected to have understood and accepted the transformations of its body which have occurred: it has first been cremated, then both absorbed by the earth and given dominion over it as an ancestor, then reconstructed with products of the earth. At this point, the spirit should be placated and honored with its new position as an ancestor embodied in the land beneath its descendants' feet.

### *Finalizing Death*

The ritual is then concluded for the day. The next part of the cycle is the *habise*, as described at the beginning of this chapter, which occurs the night before both the minor or major *mumpra*. While the mourners chant *om mani padme hum*, the gurus propitiate a range of territorial deities, to whom the mourners present cooked rice as offerings.<sup>68</sup>

These are then disposed of outside, and the spirit begins the next step in its journey during the *itil isako bhakha* (T), which takes place on the same night as the *habise*. The spirit is transferred into an offering of rice contained in a small open-weave bamboo basket that looks like a muzzle for an animal, known as the *itil isa* (T\*). After the basket is

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<sup>68</sup> The latter part of this ritual is called *sergyam* (T) and may have some link to Macdonald's description of a Tamang propitiatory song called "*sergem la hva*", in which: "the officiant, after having offered rice to the divinities of the four cardinal points, of the underworld, of the atmosphere, of the village, and of his house, requests the help of ... many other divinities." He then comments that, "One notes in these invocations the syncretic aspects and the lack of sectarianism. They seem to be rooted as often in the great as in the little Nepalese religious traditions, which in turn are derived from Indian and Tibetan models" (1975: 134–135).

hung outside on top of a wooden stake, each mourner must add a handful of cooked rice to the basket. Then each male relative sprinkles a few drops of purified water on top of the rice. Sitting outside, the entire party drinks grain beer, which on this occasion only is called *rem* (T\*). The *habise* chanting continues all night, and when it becomes light, the *itil isa* is thrown out of the basket as an offering to the spirit of the deceased. The *kutumba* must carry the rice across a river in order to dispose of it. In Darjeeling, some families also light 108 small butter lamps during the *habise* as offerings to the deceased, but this ritual addition in the Buddhist idiom was not universally accepted as part of Thangmi practice.

In the morning, after the *itil isa* has been disposed of, the main portion of the *mumpra* begins. The mourners shave their heads and don white clothes, wearing only one of their shirt-sleeves in the same manner as Hindu mourners. Another ritual basket is arranged, called *solo* (T\*), which looks similar to the one used the night before, with layers of leaves and rice, but this one is topped off with three walnuts. This basket is placed in front of the gurus at the beginning of the ritual. Later in the day, the spirit of the deceased will be transferred to this container.

The gurus sit outside under a temporary shelter which has been constructed especially for the *mumpra*. Inside, two large rice balls (T: *phorokko isa*; N: *pinda*) are made. These must be molded very carefully so that they do not break as other offerings are placed on top of them,

as this would bring bad luck upon the family of the deceased. They are brought outside and placed on an upside down funeral leaf in front of the gurus. This is then placed on one of the bamboo mats that has been made, while the other offerings of the body are placed on the second bamboo mat. One of these is for offerings from those whose parents are still alive, while the other is for those whose parents are deceased—these mourners must make an additional offering to their own parents' ancestral spirits.

As the gurus chant, the female relatives of the deceased now place offerings on the bamboo mats, including millet flour, cooked rice, milk, and bottles of beer or spirits. These are offered to the deceased. The women also bring plain breads and alcohol to offer to the mourners. All of the mourners throw cooked rice on the funeral leaves to demonstrate that they are no longer ritually polluted by death. The taboo on eating salt is now lifted. Then the guru collects offerings of rice from the mourners, and gives them to the *kutumba*, who consolidates them in his hand and circles them three times around the large rice balls. Then offerings must be made to each of the seven male and female Thangmi clans. In theory, a representative of each clan should be present, but given the lack of agreement on what the seven original clans are, as described above, there is no way to adhere to this rule strictly. Instead, members of as many clans as possible are invited, and each individual receives a portion of the offering, even if this means that it must eventually be divided into



more than the original seven pieces. It is for this moment of the *mumpira* that people make the most effort to be present; the opportunity to represent one's clan is not to be missed, and people often vie with each other to actually receive the clan offering if more than one member of their clan is present. The rice balls are left outside, and when the gurus' chants are completed, they call the spirit to come and eat. Then the rice ball is placed on an upside down bamboo tray. The *kutumba* picks it up and walks far enough to cross a river (or even a small stream or drainage pipe) and disposes of it. This section of the ritual is known as *daciko bhakha* (T), after the offerings, which are called *daci* (T\*).

The reconstruction of the body that was performed on the day of death is now repeated by the gurus in exactly the same manner (here this is called *sereringko bhakha* [T] rather than *sikitioko bhakha*). When the chants and offerings are completed, everyone eats. To extend the funeral feast with a moment of comic relief, now a bawdy skit about going hunting is enacted. This is called *ahare thesa* (T\*; N: *shikar khelne*), and must be performed by two *kutumba*. They procure a long piece of wood, to which they tie a small piece of red meat, which is called *ahare* (T\*).<sup>69</sup> The two *kutumba* carry this long stick between them on their shoulders, shouting, "let's go hunting!" They walk a ways

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<sup>69</sup> Some gurus claim that in the past a whole animal was used. This suggests that as in the wedding ritual, there may have been an unsavory (from the perspective of the Hindu state) use of cow meat here, which was done away with during the period of Hinduization described above. However, if this is the case, it is unclear why it did not lead to wholesale restructuring of the *mumpira* as it did for the *bore*.

above the shelter where the ritual continues, but within shouting distance. They shout down lewd sexual comments about the participants from above, supposedly to embarrass the spirit and make it want to leave. Then they return, as if from a hunt, and approach the gurus, who ask them questions about their hunt. “Where did you go?” “What did you kill?” “To which deities did you make offerings for good luck?” The gurus then instruct the hunters to remove their “kill” (the small piece of meat) and roast it. Then they return the meat to the gurus, who place it on the full bamboo mat, saying, “Look, spirit, we’ve brought you a fine kill from the big forest! Spirit, come and eat!”. In Darjeeling, this component of the ritual was often felt to be so obscene that women were asked to leave (including me), while in Nepal, women as well as men eagerly looked forward to this part of the ritual, and one and all enjoyed a good laugh.

The spirit now begins its final journey. In the next three sections of the ritual, it is called and controlled by the gurus, transferred from the bamboo mat—where it has been residing since it was called to eat the piece of meat—to the *solo* basket which has been waiting since the morning, and ultimately dispatched to the realm of the ancestors in the body of a chicken, or *thang* (T\*). Unlike during the earlier phases of the ritual, where the gurus’ attitude towards the spirit was one of cajoling appeasement, they now take a firmer attitude towards the spirit, scolding and in fact threatening it with consequences if it does not act appropriately by departing at this crucial moment. Now residing in the

*solo*, the spirit must be moved once again, this time to the chicken that was put aside for this purpose at the time of death some days before. The senior guru holds the chicken tightly, directing his chanting towards it. After repeating the chants to call the spirit into the body of the chicken several times in an increasingly threatening tone, the guru holding the chicken tips it down to eat some of the rice in the *solo* basket. If the chicken eats, the spirit is happy and has entered into the chicken, but if the bird doesn't eat, the spirit is still unconvinced. Usually it takes quite some time to compel the bird to eat, and the gurus repeat the chants to call the spirit into the body of the bird, with different family members taking turns holding the chicken, until it eventually eats. Whoever is holding the chicken when it eats is believed to be the favorite family member of the deceased. As soon as the spirit has entered into the chicken, the bird becomes known as the *gongor pandu* (T\*). Once this happens, the temporary shelter built for the ritual is immediately broken down.

Then, while holding the chicken, the gurus go into trance, shaking hard, in order to accompany the spirit on its final journey to the realm of the ancestors. Finally, the chief guru throws the chicken over a ridge and falls backward, fainting into the arms of someone who is waiting behind to catch him (see Figure 7.7). This is the *mumpra*'s climactic moment, for which everyone gathers around to watch, both



Figure 7.7 Guru Maila faints after throwing the *thang*. Pashelung, Suspa-Kshamawati VDC, Dolakha, Nepal, November 1999

out of a somewhat voyeuristic desire to see the powerful guru faint,<sup>70</sup> and out of a practical one to receive affirmation that the soul has finally departed from the land of the living and will not cause further trouble. Once the chicken is thrown, its name changes again, and it becomes known as the *thang* (T\*). After returning to consciousness, but still in trance, the guru confirms that the deceased has reached the underworld realm of the ancestors, and he can also see if anyone else's soul has been wrongly taken along. If this has indeed happened, an

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<sup>70</sup> This is both a demonstration of the guru's power—in his capacity to access the ancestral world—and a public admission of the limits of it, since doing this makes him lose consciousness entirely, in a manner different from any other ritual trance. Several people (particularly those involved with activist projects) commented that the fact that gurus lost consciousness at this point demonstrated that their power was not absolute, and could perhaps be refashioned in other forms.

additional ritual component called the *ayu* (T; similar to the *jokhana* divination during the Bhume propitiation described in Chapter 6) is conducted in order to recall this person's soul to the world of the living. After the chicken is thrown, the *kutumba* collects it and may keep it or eat it as he sees fit.

In an anti-climactic moment in which everyone has already begun to disperse, the ritual concludes with the chief guru recounting a myth about how the Thangmi conducted their death rituals long ago. This is called the *gardul puran* (T),<sup>71</sup> a name which is clearly related to the *Garuda Purana*, a Hindu funerary text (cf. Parry 1994: 30). Beyond the fact that both are about the process of conducting death rituals themselves, however, the specific content does not appear to be directly related. Rana Bahadur narrated it as follows:

Long ago, one child went missing from each Thangmi house. No one knew where their children had gone. One clever man finally devised a series of traps to catch the child-stealing culprit: he hid an egg in the fireplace, he dropped an ant in the oil, and put a snake in the water jug. Finally, he set a mousetrap on the threshold of his house and fashioned an arrow out of bamboo, which he left on the veranda of the house. He left one child inside the house, while he hid to watch what happened.

Lo and behold, a woman came to eat the child. First she stoked the fire, but the egg hidden inside the fireplace burst and burnt her eyes. Then she tried to wash her face with the water, but the snake bit her. Then she tried to rub oil on the wound to soothe it, but the ant in the oil bit her. She was in so much pain that she tried to run away, but she got caught in the mousetrap, and then finally tripped on the line attached to the arrow, which shot out and pierced her skin. She still tried to escape, but she dripped blood all along the path as she ran. And the man who

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<sup>71</sup> Some gurus refer to this as *alolorungko kura* (T), referring to the reed mat (T: *alolorung*) in which corpses were wrapped before the advent of cotton cloth.

had set the traps followed her. Finally she reached a cave, where she fell down and started wailing from the pain, "Aya! Aya!". She was about to die, when the man who had followed her confronted her, saying, "Aha! You haven't learned anything through your escapades. And now you're about to die. But I won't kill you. I will bring you whatever you need to die peacefully. What do you need?"

She said, "I need 360 bundles of wood, 360 funeral bearers, 360 axes, 360 sickles, 360 wooden nails, 360 fire tongs, 360 piles of wood, 360 dead oxen, and 360 buckets of grain beer. So the man collected all of these things, and the woman died. The 360 funeral bearers took her body to the cremation site. They had to wash 360 times after cremating her.

In the old days, this is what was needed to conduct a *mumpra*. If all of these things weren't collected, the spirit would not depart the world of the living. These were the traditions for a long time.

Many years later, an orphan came along. He was a funeral bearer at a mumpra along with 359 other people. Each person was supposed to bring one of each of the necessary items to make up the required 360. But the orphan went to the funeral with nothing in hand. Everything was counted at the cremation ground, and it was noticed that one of each item was missing, and the orphan was found out. The others said, "Well, you go sit by the corpse, and we'll go collect the extra things you neglected to bring." While he was sitting there waiting, the corpse came back to life and started a fight with the orphan. The corpse said, "Why have you tied me up in three places?" As the corpse and the orphan argued, they kept changing places. The corpse would jump out of his shrouds, and the orphan would jump in. Then suddenly, they saw the other funeral bearers returning. But at that moment, the corpse was outside and the orphan was inside the shroud. So the corpse called out, "Eh! The funeral bearers are coming! Come out and I'll go in!" But the orphan just scolded the corpse. The corpse was afraid that the funeral bearers would hit him if they found him out of the shroud. Finally, the orphan agreed to come out, saying, "But you, corpse, must promise to do whatever I say." The corpse agreed.

The orphan began: "From now on, corpses should not be wrapped in such elaborate shrouds. From now on, only three funeral bearers should be necessary." And he reduced all of the numbers to three. Instead of the 360 oxen, he asked that only one small bird be offered. He continued, "If I can be burned quickly with just one small flame, rather than with all the pomp

and ceremony of 360 piles of wood, I will come out of your shroud.” The corpse agreed, and they changed places, just as the funeral bearers were returning. They were so upset that they had had to collect the extra wood and waste time, so they ordered the orphan to make the funeral pyre on his own. So they all left and went to bathe 360 times. The orphan set the fire, and the corpse was burned easily in just a minute. And the orphan bathed just three times. While the others were still bathing 360 times, the orphan went to the deceased’s house. He was already there when the other funeral bearers arrived. Confused, they asked him how he had finished the work so quickly, and got angry with him, not believing that he had burned the corpse properly. But when the guru and the mourners had to prepare rice to feed the spirit three days and three nights after the cremation [in the minor *mumpura*], they saw that indeed the body had been fully burned. They believed the orphan, and when they returned, he explained the new system to them and said, “From now on we won’t go to such extravagant expenses. We don’t need 360 of everything.”

And that is the end of the story.<sup>72</sup>

In reciting this statement of flexibility at the end of each *mumpura*, gurus themselves recognize the possibilities for, and sometimes necessity of, ritual change. Many have experienced such contingencies in their own lifetimes, and have molded the ritual accordingly, for example, in the way that Latte Apa modified the taboo on not speaking with members of other ethnic groups. Just as the ritual holds within its form diverse ritual elements, as well as multiple orientations towards embodied territoriality, it also provides a framework for pragmatic adjustment. All of these factors have contributed to making it so resilient, and more recent campaigns for reform like the one outlined in the *gardul puran* have in fact been

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<sup>72</sup> Every *mumpura* that I witnessed concluded with this explicit statement of conclusion from the guru, so I have included it here even though it may appear to be outside the frame of the story itself.

successful—such as one led by Jhapa-based activists in the early 2000s to reduce the amount of alcohol consumed during *mumpra* rituals. Like the protagonist of the *gardul puran*, these Thangmi ethnic activists did not attempt to ban the ritual use of alcohol in its entirety, which would have been unacceptable, since alcohol is a crucial part of the offerings made to the deceased, as well as to the living participants in the *mumpra*,<sup>73</sup> but rather sought to minimize its use. Although some guru were initially reluctant to agree with the proposed changes, they eventually assented in the face of overwhelming popular support for the proposal that all could benefit if every *mumpra*-holding family agreed to contribute roughly the amount saved from alcohol purchases to a rotating village credit fund for community projects. During the course of my fieldwork, the actual amounts of alcohol expected as offerings decreased dramatically everywhere, and such rotating credit funds were set up in many locales.

Ultimately, making this adaptation did not directly challenge the structure of the *mumpra* or contravene the ritual power that it generated for gurus. Those gurus who took up the cause actively (like Latte Apa and Guru Maila, both of whom found ways to incorporate references to the alcohol-minimizing directive into their *paloke*) found that it in fact contributed to their popularity, since it showed that despite the other aspects of their power struggle with activists for

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<sup>73</sup> Maoist activists did attempt to implement such a comprehensive ban in Thangmi villages in Nepal from around 2001 onwards, but they were unsuccessful in enforcing it and eventually gave up the effort.



control over originary power, they were able to compromise to some extent in order to adapt to what were perceived as more “modern” expectations. This was just one of the many ways in which the *mumpra* as a ritual in practice provided a point of convergence for the competing ideologies at work in defining Thangminness. Whatever their particular commitments were, participation in a *mumpra* left each participant feeling that they, too, belonged in some way, and therefore had a vested interest in maintaining the structural framework of the ritual, even if some of them sought to revise particular details that unfolded within it. Structure and sentiment, instrumentality and affect, were all part of the ritual whole.

#### *Ancestral Bodies and Legal Claims*

The *mumpra* ritual cycle finally concludes in the building of a memorial resting place, a *chautara* (N), in honor of the deceased. This memorial is never built on the actual site in which the spirit is attached to the land at the point of cremation, but elsewhere, usually on a busy village path. In this sense, the *chautara* is a metaphorical memorial rather than a direct indication of a body or ancestor believed to reside beneath it. Metcalf and Huntington explain that, “memorialization amplifies the equation that Hertz made between the fate of the body and the fate of the soul. The corpse, by association with its container, is made enduring and larger than life in order that its owner's name be the same” (1991: 151). In the Thangmi context, however, the emphasis

is not on making the specific individual “larger than life”, but rather on endowing the Thangmi community as a whole with a lasting, recognizable, territorially-grounded presence. *Chautara*-building is a communal affair, with members from all of the clans required to participate (just as they did during the *mumpra*), and the inscriptions that these rough stone memorials bear often read only “Thangmi”, without a personal name or other individual details.<sup>74</sup> The series of *chautara* so inscribed, which one encounters on paths leading into Thangmi areas in Nepal, explicitly identify the terrain as Thangmi territory by reminding all who pass that the surrounding hillsides are full of their ancestors.<sup>75</sup> Ultimately, it is the Thangmi social body that is made lasting and larger than life, fortifying the communal edifice from within which individual projects of recognition and acts of resistance are launched. “The exploiters know they can not fully own the land they have extracted as payment for unfair debts from us, because we don’t let them forget that their crops grow out of the bodies of our ancestors,” explained one old woman, who herself became an ancestor shortly after our conversation, which I recalled poignantly at the unveiling of her *chautara*.

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<sup>74</sup> By contrast, memorial *chautara* erected by members of other groups in the region often contain an individual’s full name, their dates of birth and death, and perhaps the names of surviving family members.

<sup>75</sup> In Darjeeling, Thangmi *chautara* were interspersed with those of multiple other ethnic groups. Recall, however, that through reference in the *paloke* to the *mosandanda* as found in Nepal, even the multi-ethnic territory of Darjeeling is ritually included as an extension of Thangmi territory in Nepal.

Her assertion was borne out in legal terms when, several years later in 2006, a group of Bahun and Chhetri villagers sued the Thangmi community organization of Suspa over usage rights to the *dharmik ban* (N), the “religious forest” whose boundaries protected the local Thangmi *mosandanda* from other uses. To the surprise and satisfaction of many Thangmi, the Dolakha district court supported the Thangmi community by ruling that, due to the historical precedent set by land surveys dating back to 1950, this piece of land had always been used for religious purposes, and would remain classified as a religious forest, not a community forest (N: *samudayik ban*) as the claimants had demanded.<sup>76</sup> The decision did not explicitly state whether the land was reserved for use by members of any particular religion—an ambiguity which some observers felt was dictated by broader political circumstances, since Nepal had become a secular state while the case had been pending, and the judges might not wish to be seen as favoring any one religion over another. This lack of specificity led some of my Thangmi friends to joke that caste Hindus would be welcome to use the *mosandanda* as well—as long as their deceased had a Thangmi clan name which would enable the officiating guru to determine where to burn the body, since this “modern” (N: *adhunik*) *mosandanda*, as they liked to call it, had seven clearly distinct

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<sup>76</sup> I was not able to review the actual legal documents or land deeds connected to this case, but was told consistent versions of the story by several informants. Further research on this topic—particularly within the context of federal restructuring in which indigenous land claims will play a major part—would be worthwhile.

concrete cremation platforms that the local organization had recently built (with the money saved from minimizing alcohol consumption).

*So Much Work To Do*

“Our *mumpira*, it’s really the most important thing that we Thangmi do, it’s the ‘foundation’ of our identity. If it is destroyed we would no longer have a house to live in,” explained Basant, the BTWA general secretary. He, Gautam and I were sitting on a steep ledge on the hillside behind Darjeeling bazaar that overlooked a public cremation shelter where the body of an old Thangmi woman was about to be burnt. There were several hundred people gathered around her corpse, which was being carried towards the concrete pyre in a procession. Latte Apa was sitting under the shelter, where he had been chanting for the last several minutes in order to consecrate it as a *mosandanda*. As the corpse was placed on the bier and the guru continued with his chant, my companions restlessly played with their cell phones.

The moment we saw the first flames, Basant and Gautam jumped up. “Let’s go!” said Gautam, “We have so much work to do. Now that grandmother’s work is finished we must have a meeting, come on, let’s go back to the association office.” I was taken aback by this sudden shift in focus and felt torn. It was the first cremation I had witnessed in Darjeeling, and I wanted to know what happened next. But I also wanted to know what the work of their meeting was, and how the aspects of Thangminess produced in the domain of political action that

they were about to enter articulated with those reproduced in the domain of ritual action that they had just participated in. I suggested that they go ahead, and said that I would find them later at the office once the cremation was finished. Raising his eyebrows skeptically, Gautam said, "Are you sure you don't need a guide?" I shook my head. Gautam looked to Basant for direction, who shrugged his shoulders and set off up the hill. Latte Apa motioned to me to come join him next to the burning body.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Ambivalent Agencies: Resisting the End of a Ritual

In October 2006, a buffalo calf bled to death in the courtyard of Devikot, a temple complex dedicated to the tantric goddess Tripura-Sundari that perches on a hillside below Dolakha bazaar. Along with the young animal died one “line” (in the sense in which gurus use the English word to describe parts of their *paloke*) of Thangmi tradition. It was the first time in remembered history that two nearly naked Thangmi men had not been waiting, in trance, to drink warm blood directly from a buffalo’s vein as it was severed by a Newar butcher, while priests and dancers from that ethnic group looked on. Called *nari* in Thangmi,<sup>1</sup> or *hipathami* in Newar, every year these two Thangmi men and their entourage had walked the four hours from their village of Dumkot to Dolakha on the appointed day in order to commit this dramatic act, which was the visual and visceral climax of a much larger ritual cycle comprised of the two festivals of Devikot Jatra and Khadga Jatra.<sup>2</sup> These, in turn, were part of the local Dolakha version of the series of Dasain (Dussera) rituals which take place throughout Hindu South Asia during the harvest season.<sup>3</sup>

When I first began working with the Thangmi in 1999, this event, which I shall hereafter call Devikot-Khadga Jatra, was an annual

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<sup>1</sup> Nari is hereafter represented without italics for ease of reading.

<sup>2</sup> *Khadga* means “sword” in Nepali, and refers to the demon-slaying weapons carried by Khadga Jatra’s Newar ritual dancers.

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough discussion of Dasain as a ritual of state power practiced throughout Nepal, see Krauskopff and Lecomte-Tilouine (1996).

highlight for people throughout the region, both as participants and observers. When I asked what the most important Thangmi ritual was, many people gave Devikot–Khadga Jatra as their answer. In other conversations, once I had gotten past initial statements that the Thangmi had no culture, I was told that Devikot–Khadga Jatra was a key component of it. People from various Thangmi villages who had no personal connection to the ritual itself made these statements as often as those from Dumkot who were members of the naris’ families or otherwise involved with Devikot–Khadga Jatra. I was intrigued and puzzled about how participation in a ritual which appeared to take Thangmi individuals to the nadir of ritual impurity could in fact be so prominent in their schemes of self-recognition. I read Casper Miller’s careful description of Devikot Jatra, which comprised a substantial part of his 1979 *Faith Healers in the Himalayas* (the book described shamanic practice throughout the Dolakha region among a range of ethnic groups). He suggested that Devikot Jatra demonstrated a “double view” of the world and reality (1997[1979]: 77), in which the Thangmi believed one thing to be going on, while the Newar saw something else. This analysis made sense, yet did not seem to account fully for the ritual’s prominence in Thangmi identity statements. I wanted to understand more, and also to know if the ritual process itself, as well as the meanings people attached to it, had changed in the quarter century that had elapsed between Miller’s work and my own. I therefore made Devikot–Khadga Jatra a focal point of my early

research in Dolakha in 1999 and 2000, and returned to observe it again in 2004 and 2005 after having spent much of the intervening time in Darjeeling.

### *Thangmi Being “Really Tribal”*

When my Thangmi interlocutors in India discovered that I had spent time in the Thangmi villages of Nepal, one of the first questions that I was routinely asked was whether I had witnessed Devikot–Khadga Jatra. When they learned that I had not only seen the festival, but had recorded it on video, I was asked to show the video so that they could see, “Thangmi being really tribal”, as Puran, a BTWA executive committee member, enthusiastically described the event. These individual requests became so frequent that I decided to organize a few formal screenings of the Devikot–Khadga Jatra footage. At first unintentionally, these events also became public forums for diverse members of the Thangmi community in Darjeeling to express their views about Devikot–Khadga Jatra.

It turned out that while Thangmi from Nepal were generally consistent in feeling that participation in the ritual was a positive statement of Thangmi identity, which showcased their special command over sacred power before a multi-ethnic public,<sup>4</sup> Thangmi in India were tensely divided over the question of whether Devikot–

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<sup>4</sup> “We may look like demons, but if we don’t go the Newar can’t have their ritual, and that is our power,” was the type of statement made, similar to what I had heard in Nepal.



Khadga Jatra was a positive identity statement which should be continued in the future, or a negative sign of Thangmi domination at the hands of others which should be stopped as soon as possible. I will return later to the question of what the ritual might mean to Thangmi who actually participate in it in Nepal, here I wish to dwell for a moment on what it meant to those in India.

It was clear that the debate over Devikot–Khadga Jatra had been ongoing within the Thangmi community in India long before I arrived. My contribution of visual images (which few Thangmi in India had previously seen, except in a few blurry photos from Miller’s book, which were reprinted in every one of the Thangmi publications from Nepal alongside articles about Devikot–Khadga Jatra) only served to sharpen the arguments on both sides. Those who agreed with the Thangmi from Nepal that Devikot–Khadga Jatra was a positive expression of Thangmi identity argued that not only was it a long-standing “tradition” (the word was used in English), which Thangmi clearly wanted to continue—otherwise why would they keep doing it?—but it was incontrovertible evidence of their “tribal” nature. Young BTWA activists like Puran were mostly aligned on this side of the fence. On the other side were largely older members of the BTWA leadership. One such individual, who used his clan name “Akyangmi” as his first name, stood up to speak passionately at several video screenings about how the footage of Thangmi drinking blood caused him deep personal pain, even making him feel physically sick, since the images

showed his Thangmi brethren forced into a disgusting act by the Dolakha Newar who dominated them. He argued that Thangmi participation in Devikot–Khadga Jatra should be banned immediately, and even requested the BTWA to organize a “mission” to go and “convince” the Dumkot Thangmi to end this tradition. Much of the senior BTWA leadership, such as the Vice President Gopal, shared Akyangmi’s opinion (which Gopal told me privately after summoning me to his house one evening to ask for my advice on the matter), although most were not so eager to assume responsibility for bringing about the end of the ritual, for any intentional action in this direction would clearly alienate a large portion of the Thangmi community.

For Thangmi in India, this divide seemed to be a generational one, which showed starkly how tribalness was a very new kind of identity for them, the political desire for which did not always match its affective contents. That is to say, for older BTWA members like Gopal and Akyangmi who had grown up striving to be modern Indian citizens within a pan–Nepali, Hindu idiom, watching Thangmi consume buffalo blood or imagining them eating mouse meat (see Chapter 5) produced visceral feelings of aversion. Yet these men were passionate advocates of the campaign for ST status at the political level, and these were the types of actions linked to the concept of tribalness within the popular and governmental imaginations. By contrast, for younger activists like Puran or Rajen, who had become involved with the BTWA during the 1990s when tribal politics was already becoming the dominant frame

for ethnic activism in Darjeeling, the images of Thangmi drinking blood produced visceral feelings of pride and excitement at their tribal heritage. The fact that such positive feelings were based on the fetishization of images of Thangmi in Nepal doing things that neither Puran or Rajen themselves were immediately eager to do is besides the point here; rather, I want to emphasize that these younger activists were more than willing to identify themselves with such behaviors in a way that older individuals were not. The terms of recognition in India had shifted so substantially after the implementation of the Mandal commission report—or at least had been perceived to shift in this manner—that the younger generation had actually come to *feel* very differently about what it might mean to refigure Thangmi as a tribal identity than the older one. Such transformations demonstrate how the results of ethnicization within a set of national or transnational frames may be not only instrumental—compelling people to objectify or performatize certain practices for their political value—but affective, changing at the subjective level the way people feel about their own participation in, or identification with, such practices.

As the stakes in the ST game increased with the Tamang and Limbu attainment of that status in 2003, and the senior BTWA members receded further into the background (Gopal died in 2005 after a long illness), the younger faction who sought to valorize Devikot-Khadga Jatra as a Thangmi identity practice won out. Towards the end of my first long fieldwork stay in Darjeeling in 2004, I was

summoned to a special meeting of the BTWA executive committee meeting, at which I was asked to contribute to the organization's activities in several ways. Beyond the request for a financial contribution to their efforts to secure land for a new Bhume temple (the results of which were described in Chapter 6), the highest priority on their list was that I write an article about Devikot-Khadga Jatra, illustrated with photos, which they could include in their ST application. The video which I had already handed over to them was not enough; as would be made explicitly clear to them during the 2006 CRI verification visit (as described in the section on the chewar ritual in Chapter 7), the BTWA leadership had already begun to feel that written work, especially in the format of an academic article with my name and university affiliation on it, would carry much more weight with the government than anonymous, unedited video footage.

### *Complicit Agendas*

This request for an article was not out of line with my own existing agenda, on which the idea of writing an article about Devikot-Khadga Jatra had been an item for some time already. I worried that my observations from the 1999 and 2000 events were becoming dated, and I felt that Devikot-Khadga Jatra would be a suitable topic for a pre-dissertation academic publication. I also felt increasing pressure to make some of my ethnographic material available to the naris and their communities in Dolakha, as well as to the NTS. Although I had already

returned loose photo prints to the naris, I had not embedded them in a written document. On a recent trip to Dumkot I had asked the naris and the gurus involved in Devikot–Khadga Jatra about the propriety of writing about the ritual and using their photos in an academic publication; I had worried that writing about the ritual might challenge or diminish the naris’ power, or make them feel that I was taking advantage of them in some way. However, these issues did not seem to concern the naris. In answer to my question, Sukhbir, the senior nari in whose house we sat, rummaged in the rafters above our heads to pull out a dog-eared, termite-eaten copy of the original 1979 edition of Miller’s book, which fell open immediately to the spread of photos depicting the nari in trance, and said, “Yes, you must write a new book. We can’t even see ourselves in this one anymore, it is so old. If your purpose was not to write a book, why did you come?” Everyone nodded in agreement.

This was a very different kind of accusation from those I had occasionally had to defend myself against from other Thangmi, who suspected that I might be personally profiting from the sale of photos I had taken of them. Here, the naris seemed to be saying that I had a responsibility to write about what I had seen at Devikot–Khadga Jatra, in order to validate as worthwhile their efforts over the course of several years to welcome me into their homes, include me in their entourage as they walked from Dumkot to Dolakha, and explain the complexities of their ritual role. In this context, my writing could

provide a sense of existential recognition, augmenting rather than challenging the naris' power. This potential existed in part due to both my and the naris' particular positionalities, and the relationships between them, which made this situation rather different from the case of Thangmi activists seeking to scripturalize gurus' *paloke*. The nari were not guru—they did not mediate between the human and divine worlds on any other occasion—and as such they held no personal purchase on the power generated from their participation in the ritual, which was already considered to be the shared resource of all Thangmi. Furthermore, I was not a Thangmi activist, and although most Thangmi might not fully understand what motivated me to do such extensive research in their community, they did not suspect me of sharing what was often perceived as the nefarious agenda of their own activists to appropriate originary power for personal benefit.

All of these issues weighed on my mind as I watched the debate over Devikot–Khadga Jatra unfold in Darjeeling; I often had to bite my tongue in order to avoid expressing too strongly my own opinion that since the naris themselves felt proud of their ritual role and not only wanted to continue it, but wanted it to be recognized in writing, a BTWA mission to terminate the tradition would be counter-productive both for their organization and for the Thangmi as a whole. I was therefore pleased when such proposals began to weaken and popular opinion backed the younger leaders who advocated the continuation of the practice. In this context, the request that I write an article about

Devikot–Khadga Jatra felt like a vindication of sorts, foremost for the naris and their status within the broader Thangmi community, but secondarily for me and my assessment that the ritual did indeed play an important role as a positive site of Thangmi identity production.

I set about writing the article in early 2005, and by that spring it had been accepted for publication in the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*, pending revisions. It was published in fall 2005, just in time for me to take copies to Darjeeling on my next field trip there. The BTWA leaders were pleased that I had taken their request so seriously and quickly produced exactly what they wanted. From my perspective, their desire for such an article was simply the impetus that pushed me to move forward with my own long-standing idea of writing it, and in my own way I stood to benefit as much, if not more, from the publication as the BTWA or the naris themselves (or the NTS, who had asked me to contribute photos of Devikot–Khadga Jatra for a display mounted on the wall at their May 2005 conference, the details of which are described in Chapter 5). My relationships with these varied groups of Thangmi were cemented through the publication of the article, in a manner that demonstrates well the complicity that George Marcus has described as characteristic of contemporary multi-sited research projects: “Despite their very different values and commitments ... the ethnographer and his subjects are ... broadly engaged in a pursuit of knowledge with resemblances in form and context that they can recognize” (1999: 103).

### *The End of Devikot-Khadga Jatra*

One year after my article was published, the Thangmi stopped participating in Devikot-Khadga Jatra. After subduing my initial disbelief, I had to come to terms with the fact that most Thangmi seemed unconcerned by this turn of events, including the same people whom just a few years earlier had told me how important the ritual was to them. Conditioned as much by the particular desires of the naris in Dolakha as those of my activist informants in Darjeeling, each seeking recognition in their own way, I had wanted to believe that I understood those desires, and could even help fulfill them. Perhaps too much of the “you are our god” talk that I described in Chapter 1 had gone to my head, but the sudden disappearance of what had seemed to me an important ritual felt initially like a personal betrayal, which rattled my confidence. I wanted to resist the end of the ritual, but instead it seemed to resist my analysis.

Upon reflection, I came to see that the conclusion of Thangmi participation in Devikot-Khadga Jatra demonstrated forcefully that the sacred object of Thangmi identity transcended any single set of historically embedded practices that at one time produced it. The agency to produce this object was diffuse, located in the simultaneous action of the multiple practices and performances of all those who identified as Thangmi, not in any piece of writing—academic, activist, or otherwise—which limited that agency by promoting any one of the



many possible interpretations of it as singularly enduring beyond the active frame of its own production. For some Thangmi, writing itself was one such form of agentic action—this was certainly the case for the activists who worked hard to produce *Dolakhareng* or *Niko Bachinte*, formulating their own positions as Thangmi as they wrote—but the resultant texts did not, as they hoped, encapsulate the totality of Thangminess in all of its disaggregated variations. Nor did the *palo* of the guru, which could not fully incorporate the experiences of young, educated Thangmi, for whom writing had become an embodied necessity just as orality was for the gurus. Unable to anticipate what was just around the corner, the text of my 2005 article was similarly incomplete, just as this one is.

I review these details of the article's back-story because I want to provide context for several excerpts from it presented in their entirety below. These excerpts accomplish several tasks: First, they explain what Devikot-Khadga Jatra was like while it was practiced, recognizing its continued value as a piece of Thangmi history. Second, they present my analysis of what it meant to those who participated in it, within a broader theoretical context that addresses other important questions about Thangmi agency that remain relevant to this dissertation beyond the specific context of Devikot Jatra. I do not disavow this analysis, rather, I still believe it explains well what happened within the frame of Devikot-Khadga Jatra. The problem is simply that I could not, at the time, recognize it as a frame and

separate it analytically from the practices and performances that unfolded within it. In the concluding part of this chapter I transpose the original analysis to the new post-Devikot-Khadga Jatra frame. Third, these excerpts demonstrate my complicity in constructing Devikot Jatra as a timeless structure that was somehow essential to the production of Thangmi identity, rather than recognizing it as a contingent practice that articulated aspects of Thangmi identity in a manner recognizable to a specific audience at a specific time and place. As far as I know, the Indian government has not been informed about the ritual's end, and my article stands as the primary description of it in the Thangmi application for Scheduled Tribe status. Perhaps its presence there had no effect anyway; or even the opposite effect of that desired by the activists who had solicited it. "Why is there an article about a ritual in Nepal here anyway?", I can imagine the bureaucrat saying, as he tosses the file to the bottom of the towering stack of applications.<sup>5</sup> I will probably never know exactly how it was received; some details are beyond the limits of even the most complicit multi-sited ethnographic project.

The following excerpts from my 2005 article are presented in unedited form as long block quotations, unchanged from the original with the exception of small stylistic details for clarity and consistency.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Recent estimates put the number of aspirant ST groups across India at over 1000 (see Middleton and Shneiderman 2008: 43).

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to the European Bulletin of Himalayan Research for permission to reprint this material. The original article is listed in the bibliography as Shneiderman (2005b).

Footnotes are part of the original article unless otherwise noted. Ellipses denote places where portions of the original article have been left out. For the most part, the omitted sections are background material which the reader will already have encountered elsewhere in this dissertation. New analysis is interspersed in standard formatting. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the particular historical conjuncture that brought the ritual to an end in 2006, and its implications for Thangmi in the future.

### **Agency and Resistance in the Thangmi–Newar Ritual Relationship: An Analysis of Devikot–Khadga Jatra in Dolakha, Nepal**

#### *Introduction*

Every year on the tenth day of the autumn Dasain festival, a diverse crowd gathers in the courtyard of Devikot, a temple complex dedicated to the tantric goddess Tripura–Sundari in the historic town of Dolakha, in Nepal’s central–eastern district of the same name. The crowd is here to watch two men go into trance and drink the blood of a live buffalo calf. The blood drinkers are members of the Thangmi ethnic group, a population of approximately 40,000 who speak a Tibeto–Burman language and are marginalized within Nepal’s ethnic and caste hierarchies ...

Taken together, the Devikot and Khadga Jatras are an arena for the negotiation of power relationships between two of the most numerically prominent ethnic communities in the Dolakha region: the Thangmi and the Newar. The Newar community, which in Dolakha is dominated by the Shrestha caste, has historically occupied a position of economic and social dominance in the area ... In general terms, the relationship between the Newar and Thangmi communities could be read as that of ruler to subject, dominator to dominated. However, I argue here that the ritual performances of Devikot and Khadga Jatra demonstrate that such a dualistic reading of Newar–Thangmi relationships is too simplistic, as is explaining Thangmi participation in these rituals as a standard narrative of resistance.

To Thangmi participants in the rituals, the act of blood-drinking signifies a state of union with the goddess they call Maharani, and thus serves as a source of divine agency and power. To Newar participants, on the other hand, the consumption of animal blood marks the Thangmi as demons and carriers of ritual impurity. Although a natural reading of these ritual acts would be one of Thangmi subjugation as speechless subalterns, who manage everyday forms of resistance (Scott 1985), but little else, here I seek a different interpretation. I follow Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney's call to recognize the "construction of multiple structures of meaning" (1987: 5) within ritual performance, in order to understand how the apparent process of identity negation embedded in the ritual structure of these festivals in fact generates expressions and actions of agency—albeit ambivalent and uneven ones—which are central to the formation of Thangmi identity.

... One central question that arises when considering the formation of Thangmi identity is why the numerically substantial and culturally distinctive Thangmi population has remained almost entirely absent from lay, academic, and political discourses on ethnicity in Nepal, particularly in an ethnographic context where other groups with much smaller populations have been extensively "anthropologised". The lack of any obvious material culture or large-scale performance tradition that is uniquely Thangmi is a large part of the answer. Without distinctive dance, song or craft customs performed in their own villages, Thangmi individuals emphasize participation in Devikot-Khadga Jatra as an important component of their own identity narratives, and represent the blood-drinking performance in Dolakha bazaar as a key event in creating and maintaining a sense of ethnic pride and communal identity. What appear as rituals of subordination on a superficial level are in fact a fundamental aspect of the production of an agentive Thangmi ethnic consciousness. This is not an anomaly within an otherwise typical identity narrative built upon positive markers of ethnicity such as cultural and religious purity or racial homogeneity. Rather, the ritual performances that I describe here are one component of a broader process of identity production in which the Thangmi community intentionally highlights their *absence* from national ethnicity discourses that focus on purity, and instead emphasize a distinctive identity built around expressions of impurity such as cultural mixture, religious syncretism, and racial hybridity.

## **Theoretical and Comparative Frameworks**

### *Absence, Agency and Resistance*

The concept of “absence” builds upon the theory of “negation”, as developed by Ranajit Guha in his classic description of peasant consciousness (1983) and addresses some of the limitations of Guha’s definition of the latter term. Guha argues that domination and resistance exist in a dialectical relationship that can never escape the terms of domination. However, I suggest instead that reading ritual as a polysemic performance that has entirely different effects within multiple, simultaneous phenomenological frameworks may indicate how even an apparent negation of subaltern consciousness—such as the Thangmi role in Devikot–Khadga Jatra—can in fact be understood as a constructive site of agency production. Moreover, the intentionality that the concept of negation attributes to dominant forces gives them too much credit. Using the motif of absence to describe a conscious strategy that transcends the conditions of domination acknowledges that subaltern agencies are often produced in unexpected ways on their own terms.

I use this theoretical framework here for two reasons. First, despite the importance of Subaltern Studies within Indian intellectual circles, there has been relatively little reference to this school of theory within Nepal and Himalayan studies to date.<sup>7</sup> Correcting this oversight may help develop more nuanced perspectives on important social issues in Nepal, and the present material lends itself well to such an analysis. Second, although there has been a backlash against the over-use of the concept of “resistance” within anthropology and other social sciences over the past decade (Brown 1996), I believe that there remain fresh, productive ways that it can be employed, particularly in tandem with a careful understanding of “agency” that recognizes its ambivalence. Given the history of exploitative relationships in many parts of rural Nepal, there remains a clear need for discussions of the specific, culturally constructed channels through which power operates in Nepali contexts. Although Nepal does not share India’s history of direct colonization, which may be another reason why scholars of Nepal have not fully

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<sup>7</sup> This may be due in part to an understandable distaste in Nepal for outright appropriations of scholarship from India. However, it is important to move beyond such knee-jerk reactions in order to determine which insights emerging from this theoretical school might be useful for interpreting Nepali socio-historical contexts.

engaged with the post-colonial emphasis of Subaltern Studies, the politics of Nepal's "internal colonialism" (Holmberg 2000: 928–929) are equally suited to such analyses.

Laura Ahearn offers a bare-bones definition of "agency" as, "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (2001: 112). Using such a broad definition allows us to move beyond misunderstandings of the term, which have often cast agency as simply a "synonym for resistance" (Ahearn 2001: 115). I follow theorists like Ahearn and Sherry Ortner in arguing for an approach which moves beyond the notion that agency equals resistance. This false equation limits agency to the oppositional politics which oppressed groups employ vis-à-vis their oppressors, rather than contextualizing it as a culturally constructed mode of action which various groups and individuals understand and use on their own terms in a wide array of situations that are not necessarily oppositional. As Ortner puts it:

Agency is not an entity that exists apart from cultural construction... Every culture, every subculture, every historical moment, constructs its own forms of agency, its own modes of enacting the process of reflecting on the self and the world and of acting simultaneously within and upon what one finds there. (1995b: 186)

I agree with Ortner's ensuing analysis that often, "resistance studies are thin because they are ethnographically thin: thin on the internal politics of dominated groups, thin on the cultural richness of those groups, thin on the subjectivity—the intentions, desires, fears, projects—of the actors engaged in these dramas" (1995: 190). Here I attempt to engage with this critique by offering an analysis which focuses especially on Thangmi individuals' subjective experiences of the cultural and religious forms of agency enacted in their performance at Devikot-Khadga Jatra, and their ensuing representations of these performances in identity discourses.

When I wrote the original article, I had not yet made the distinction between "practice" and "performance" that is introduced in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. However, terming the naris' ritual participation at Devikot-Khadga Jatra "performance" remains appropriate, at least in part. As described in Chapter 2, for the Thangmi, performance is a

form of ritualized action conducted in the public domain for non-Thangmi publics which objectifies certain aspects of the sacred object of Thangmi identity for the purposes of political recognition. As I shall argue at the conclusion of this chapter, at one level, this is precisely what the Thangmi participation in Devikot–Khadga Jatra did within the historical context of the Newar polity of Dolakha. It is telling that Thangmi gurus describe the anointing of the naris with red powder as a process of “imitating” or “dressing up” (N: *nakal parnu*) as demons. As described below, Devikot–Khadga Jatra cannot proceed without this transformation, which clearly marks the naris’ participation in the ritual as a performance set apart from their daily life. This performance is intended to assert command over ritual power in relation to the Newar, who are otherwise in the dominant position.

On another level, however, the naris engage in an internally focused practice, in which they commune with the goddess Maharani. In this sense, the naris’ act was at once both practice and performance, which converged in the particular frame of Devikot–Khadga Jatra in Dolakha for a substantial period of time. Now, however, these two elements have been delinked: the performance is no longer conducted, but the practice has, in a sense, been “re-practicalized” within an exclusively Thangmi context in Dumkot, where the naris continue to go into trance at the same time each year in the comfort of their homes, without painting their bodies red or otherwise engaging in the performance aspects of what used to occur in Dolakha.

### *Power and Ritual in Nepal*

In making this argument, I follow David Holmberg's discussion of Chhechu, a key ritual for the Tamang, another ethnic group who speak a Tibeto-Burman language and whose experiences of the Nepali state are in many ways comparable to those of the Thangmi. Holmberg focuses on the production of indigenous Tamang consciousness and power through the annual Chhechu ritual, in which the dominant Hindu hierarchical order is mocked and derided. In one sense this is a perfect example of Guha's "ritual inversion", in which subaltern identity is ritually produced in dialectical fashion as a negation of dominant identity. But Guha's framework is limited by its dualistic structure, embodied in the presumption that rituals operate in a unitary symbolic field to which each individual must relate as either dominant or dominated. Holmberg expands upon this by acknowledging the multiplicity of ritual meanings at work:

The plays of Chhechu are evidence of opposed and continuously differentiating semiological and social order in structures of domination in the state of Nepal ... The ludic plays expose the arbitrariness of orders of domination, and the exorcisms of antisocial beings linked to that political order constitute the symbolic first steps of a metaprocess to produce collective oppositional power ... (2000: 932)

In Holmberg's formulation, Chhechu is not simply an inversion of structures of dominance, but rather an expression of the multiple "semiological orders" at work in the Nepali context. Within that multiplicity exists a latent Tamang consciousness, which although "not isolable from implicit and explicit affirmations of social values opposed to .... the values of those who dominated them" (Holmberg 2000: 932), is nevertheless premised on a fundamentally different configuration of the symbolic order.

Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka (1996) takes a similar approach in her description of the annual Dasain ritual at Belkot in far Western Nepal. She demonstrates how local interpretations of the national Dasain cycle serve as an opportunity for ethnic communities to negotiate their relationship with the state and each other. Identifying Dasain as a ritual of "state power", Pfaff-Czarnecka shows how local elites in different parts of the country use the festival to at once express their loyalty to the



central rulers in Kathmandu, and emphasize their local power over others by “linking their prerogatives to symbols related to the central rulers” (1996: 64). In this context, Pfaff-Czarnecka also emphasizes the importance of multiple ritual meanings. Although Dasain is indeed intended as a ritual of state dominance, it contains within it the potential for other agencies:

Power rituals in complex societies pertain to specific sociopolitical orders and to the authority of those in focal political positions within these orders. They not only express and dramatise social realities, but also, more specifically organise social groups by relating them with one another. One important element in relating social groups is the establishment of symbolic means for expressing the supremacy of one group and the subordination of others. However, there always remains a large scope for ambiguity and for disagreement between various participants who may attach multiple meanings to a religious celebration at different ritual levels. (1996: 59)

This analysis points towards one of the most important polysemic aspects of the Devikot-Khadga Jatra complex. On a phenomenological level, the Dasain ritual serves as a source of embodied social and religious power for Thangmi participants within the web of *local* hierarchical relationships, while for Newar participants, it provides a means of asserting political power at the *national* level by deploying central power symbols in a show of domination over local populations such as the Thangmi.

Both Holmberg and Pfaff-Czarnecka conclude their articles by asserting an indigenous Tamang “consciousness of the circumstances of their domination” (Holmberg 2000: 940). In Holmberg’s case this consciousness results in “defiant” rituals such as Chhechu, while in Pfaff-Czarnecka’s case it results in a Tamang boycott of Dasain.<sup>8</sup> Like Holmberg, Pfaff-Czarnecka argues that the Tamang clearly understand their symbolic subjugation and “ritual inferiority within the Hindu hierarchy”, and that they combat it with their own “powerful symbolic means in order to make a forceful political statement” — choosing “to ‘read’ Devighat [Dasain] as a symbol of their oppression within the Hindu realm” (1996: 89).

These insights form the foundation for my own analysis by

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<sup>8</sup> The idea of boycotting Dasain is not only a local phenomenon in Belkot, but rather a strategy used at the national level by several ethno-political organizations representing different minority groups in recent years, as described by Susan Hangen (2005b).

delinking indigenous consciousness from the terms of its domination and locating a potential space for alternative subjectivities in the polysemic nature of ritual symbol. However, the Thangmi case is different from those discussed above because there is no obvious defiance displayed in their ritual performance, nor any clearly expressed, symbolically powerful statement such as a boycott. Although some younger Thangmi ethnic activists based in Kathmandu have discussed the option of joining such a boycott called by organizations representing more prominent ethnic groups such as the Tamang and Gurung, they have faced extensive resistance to this idea from senior community members in the Thangmi villages in Nepal, who see Dasain in general, and Devikot–Khadga Jatra in particular, as a quintessentially local Thangmi festival rather than an imported Hindu one. This situation could be read as evidence that, unlike the Tamang ritual actors whom Holmberg and Pfaff–Czarnecka discuss, the Thangmi participants in Devikot–Khadga Jatra remain unconscious of the terms of their domination. I suggest instead that from a Thangmi perspective, enacting their annual ritual role within the Newar–dominated Devikot–Khadga Jatra ritual complex is an agentive act that articulates an indigenous consciousness which challenges the terms of domination by unexpectedly appropriating them as a positive source of identity, and thereby power.

Building upon the earlier discussion of agency as the socioculturally mediated capacity to act, I turn to Judith Butler for a slightly more nuanced understanding of the term. Butler sees agency as a fundamentally ambivalent quality dependent on both power and resistance:

...the act of appropriation may involve an alteration of power such that the power assumed or appropriated works against the power that made that assumption possible. Where conditions of subordination make possible the assumption of power, the power assumed remains tied to those conditions, but in an ambivalent way; in fact, the power assumed may at once retain and resist that subordination. This conclusion is not to be thought of as (a) a resistance that is *really* a recuperation of power or (b) a recuperation that is *really* a resistance. It is both at once, and this ambivalence forms the bind of agency. (1997b: 13)

This notion of “ambivalent agency” is a useful analytical tool for interpreting the superficially contradictory aspects of domination

and subordination embedded in the Thangmi roles within the Devikot–Khadga Jatra complex. Butler’s formulation permits contradictions, locating the production of agency itself in the tension between power and resistance.

### **Setting the Scene**

#### *Dolakha Newar History and Religion*

Dolakha bazaar is located in northeastern Nepal, 140 kilometers away from Kathmandu by road, and about 20 kilometers as the crow flies from the border with China’s Tibetan Autonomous Region. It is a provincial, middle hills town that is now secondary in importance to Charikot, the contemporary Dolakha district headquarters, but was historically a centre of power for the entire central–eastern Himalayas. Slusser suggests that Dolakha most likely began as a Licchavi settlement (1982: 85), and was then an independent principality ruled by the ancestors of today’s Dolakha Newar population. The dialect of the Newar language spoken in Dolakha is substantially different from those spoken in the Kathmandu Valley (Genetti 1994), and local Newar cultural practices are similarly distinctive, although many of the overarching ritual forms find parallels in those practiced in Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Patan.

Unfortunately there has been very little social scientific research conducted on Dolakha Newar society or culture to date, and since my own focus is on Thangmi identity and practice, I am not able to do justice to the Newar perspective on events. However, several publications on Dolakha’s history provide important clues to the roots of the Newar–Thangmi relationship. The earliest written record from the area dates to 1324 AD, in which the town is mentioned as the refuge destination for a deposed Mithila prince who died en route (Slusser 1982: 259). By 1453 AD, Dolakha was under the control of King Kirti Simha (Regmi 1980: 136).<sup>9</sup> He and his descendants used the term *dolakhadipati* to designate themselves as rulers independent from the powers of the Kathmandu Valley. Dolakha’s kings depended upon their strategic location—which gave them control over access to a primary Kathmandu–Lhasa trading route—to maintain favorable relations with rulers on both sides of the border. King Indra Simha Deva demonstrated his kingdom’s economic power beyond a doubt by minting the first

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<sup>9</sup> As part of his Regmi Research Series, Mahesh Chandra Regmi translated into English key sections of the authoritative work on Dolakha’s history: *Dolakhako Aitihasik Ruprekha* by Dhanavajra Vajracharya and Tek Bahadur Shrestha (2031 VS). My citations of the work here refer to Regmi’s English translation.

coin within Nepal's borders in approximately 1546 AD (Regmi 1980: 171).

At the religious level, Dolakha's inhabitants were and remain largely Hindu, with a striking absence of the Buddhist *vajracharya* priests prominent among the Kathmandu Valley's Newar communities. The primary Buddhist influence in Dolakha came from its rulers' direct contact with Tibet through trade, rather than from Kathmandu Buddhist institutions (Regmi 1980: 174). Early on, the deity Bhimsen became the tutelary deity of Dolakha's rulers.<sup>10</sup> In an inscription dated to 1568 AD, King Jita Deva and his co-rulers call themselves "servants of Bhimeswara" (Regmi 1980: 176). A 1611 AD inscription refers to the renovation of the Bhairav, or Bhimsen, temple in the bazaar, so it must have already existed before that date. As Slusser explains:

Bhimasena's cult is apparently relatively recent in the Kathmandu Valley, and its source is Dolakha, a large Newar settlement in eastern Nepal. Even today in Dolakha, Bhimasena worship exceeds that of Shiva and Shakti in popularity, and his annual festival is the chief event of the region. (1982: 258)

This emphasis on Bhimsen is central in understanding the Newar–Thangmi ritual relationship, for as we shall see below, the Thangmi believe that he was originally "their" deity, which the Dolakha Newar appropriated. In addition, Tripura–Sundari, the goddess who presides over the Devikot temple where the blood-drinking ceremony occurs, is revered as Bhimsen's mother.

Another aspect of Dolakha Newar social organization that may have been central in shaping their relationship with Thangmi villagers is the lack of a Jyapu caste. The Jyapu are the low-caste peasants who comprise the bottom rung of Newar caste society in other areas such as the Kathmandu Valley (Gellner 2003) and Nuwakot (Chalier–Visuvalingam 2003). Several authors have commented on the striking absence of this group in Dolakha (Peet 1978: 399, van Driem 2001: 765). As Vajracharya and Shrestha comment, "...most of the Newars of Dolakha are Shresthas, very few of them are Udas or Vajracharya. There are no Jyapu peasants in Dolakha as in Kathmandu Valley"

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<sup>10</sup> This deity is linked with the pan-South Asian Bhairav, and in Nepal is referred to alternately as Bhimsen and Bhimeswara. As Visuvalingam and Chalier–Visuvalingam put it, "Bhimsen, whom the Newar explicitly identify with Bhairava, receives blood sacrifices ..." (2004: 125). In Dolakha, Bhimsen is also worshipped as Mahadev (Regmi 1981: 106), and this is often the name preferred in Thangmi prayers to the deity.

(Regmi 1980: 126). In other Newar communities, Jyapu peasants are often called upon to carry out ritually impure acts within major religious festivals.<sup>11</sup> With no Jyapu available to perform such ritual roles in Dolakha, Newar ritual officiants may well have adapted to local conditions by turning to poor Thangmi peasants to fulfill these roles instead.

### *Newar–Thangmi Relationships*

... In general, the Thangmi are regarded as people of low social status in the eyes of both hill Bahun–Chhetris and Dolakha Newars. This is due in part to their poverty, but also to the fact that their reliance on cultural and religious mixture keeps them from being categorized clearly in Nepal’s caste hierarchy ...

Although the current low socio-economic position of the Thangmi appears to be more a factor of exploitation by Bahun–Chhetri landlords, rather than a direct result of Newar oppression, this three-way power dynamic shapes the consciousness of Thangmi ritual participants and their desire to perform their ritual roles. In fact, the exploitative practices of caste Hindus have pushed the Thangmi closer to the Dolakha Newar, whom many Thangmi see as less abusive than their Bahun–Chhetri counterparts. In general, Thangmi tend to view Dolakha Newar as wealthy relatives who are condescending but not dangerous, while they view Bahun–Chhetri as harmful outsiders.

Linguistically speaking, there are a surprising number of lexical correspondences between the Thangmi language and the Dolakha dialect of Newar (Turin 2004a). While it remains unclear whether these shared lexical items and grammatical features indicate a close genetic relationship or rather point to intensive borrowing over generations, the linguistic data suggests that the two communities have been in close contact for a very long time. At the level of affective identity, Thangmi feelings of closeness to the Dolakha Newar are also fostered by the fact that a Dolakha Newar king features prominently in a Thangmi myth which describes the origin of the Thangmi clans [as also described in Chapter 7 of this dissertation]. In this story, the king’s servants find a lone Thangmi woman meditating in a cave, and when they bring her back to Dolakha and present her to the

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<sup>11</sup> Chalier-Visuvalingam describes the blood-drinking Jyapu *dhami* in Nuwakot’s Bhairav festival (2003). Marie Lecomte-Tilouine has told me of another ritual devoted to the goddess Varahi in Tistung, Makwanpur district, during which a person from the most impure group available (as classified in the Muluki Ain), must serve as a “specialist in impurity” for the Newar high caste celebrants (personal communication).

king, he falls in love with her immediately. The king marries the Thangmi woman, and after some months her brothers come to find her in Dolakha and return her to the village. By the time they locate her and smuggle her out of town, she is pregnant with the king's child. The pregnancy results in twins, who are the forefathers of the Thangmi *roimirati* clan—derived from the Thangmi term *roimi*, meaning 'Newar'. Several of the Thangmi participants in Devikot–Khadga Jatra belong to this clan. Many Thangmi maintain a sense of closeness to the Dolakha Newar despite their different socio-economic circumstances. This feeling of shared heritage remains largely unreciprocated by Dolakha Newar, who are anxious to distance themselves from the poor and low status Thangmi. For most Newar participants, Devikot–Khadga Jatra provides an annual opportunity to express their paternalistic dominance over the Thangmi.

## Ritual Description

### Overview

The Devikot and Khadga Jatras take place within the broader context of Dasain, the twelve day Hindu festival which commemorates the victory of the goddess Durga over the demon Mahisasura. My description draws upon the three times I witnessed the festival in October 1999, 2000, and 2004, as well as Casper Miller's account from 1974–1975 (1997[1979]). Miller's description provides a valuable time depth to the discussion, and many of the ritual actors that Miller introduces remain the same twenty-five years later.

The Devikot Jatra takes place on Dasami, the tenth day of Dasain, at the Devikot temple devoted to Tripura–Sundari at the northern end of Dolakha bazaar. In addition to being a manifestation of the great goddess alternately known as Parvati or Bhagvati, Tripura–Sundari is one of the ten tantric *mahavidyas*, or great wisdom goddesses, known for their strong associations with death, violence, pollution, and despised marginal social roles. It is therefore not surprising that the Devikot ritual is famous for its gruesome highlight: two Thangmi ritual practitioners, known as *nari* in Thangmi, or *hipathami* in Dolakha Newar, are chosen by the goddess to drink blood from the vein of a live buffalo as it is slowly sacrificed to Bhairav, Tripura–Sundari's son, whose statue stands inside the temple.<sup>12</sup> Newar officiants say that the buffalo embodies the demon Raktabir and must be killed so that the goddess may prevail. According to various Newar informants, the *nari* are symbolically

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<sup>12</sup> *Hipa* means 'blood' in Dolakha Newar, while *thami* refers to the ethnic group.

cast as either attendants to the goddess, or her spies, but in either case their purpose is to drink the demon Raktabir's blood in order to prevent the regeneration of new demons from it. As far as I have been able to ascertain, this festival as a separate ritual entity held on Dasami is unique to Dolakha, although parallel elements may be found as components of other days of the Dasain festival elsewhere in the Newar world (Levy 1990: 537).<sup>13</sup>

*Khadga* means 'sword' in Nepali, and refers to the daggers held by the twelve Newar dancers (all Shrestha) who create the backbone of the Khadga Jatra ritual procession. Occurring on Ekadasi, the eleventh day of Dasain, Khadga Jatra can be seen as a continuation of the Devikot Jatra held the day before. However, unlike Devikot Jatra, Khadga Jatra is celebrated in other Newar communities across Nepal (Levy 1990: 551; Gellner 1992: 314). In each area, the ethnic configuration of the ritual participants is different, but it seems that non-Newar groups are often incorporated. For example, Pfaff-Czarnecka describes a "Magar specialist" who carries a sword on the seventh day of the Dasain festivities (1996: 71). All this suggests that Khadga Jatra in particular and Dasain in general may well be standard formats for the negotiation of power relations between Newar populations and the other groups with which they come into contact. However, the Dolakha situation is unusually complex because the Thangmi are so central to the proceedings, and their participation in the ritual is so essential to their own identity formation.

#### *Before the Festival: Preparations in Dumkot*

The Thangmi involved in the festival come exclusively from Dumkot, a largely Thangmi village located in Sundrawati VDC, about four hour's walk northwest of Dolakha bazaar. Their group includes the following members: four nari, who work in two pairs, alternating as blood-drinkers for Devikot Jatra from year to year; two guru, or shamans, who act as spiritual guides to the nari; four assistants who are often the sons or other close male relatives of the nari they serve; two *tauke* (Thangmi, derived from the Nepali *tauko*, meaning 'head'), the men who will carry the heads of slaughtered buffaloes on Khadga Jatra; an accountant; a manager who collects offerings and keeps track of the groups' supplies; a person responsible for making and

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<sup>13</sup> Chalier-Visuvalingam describes a Newar festival in Nuwakot in which a Jyapu ritual specialist drinks the blood of a buffalo sacrificed to Bhairav, but this occurs during the springtime *ratha-yatra* rather than during the autumn Dasain (2003).

maintaining the shelter, or Dasain *ghar* (N), or house, in which the entire group will stay during their tenure in Dolakha; and a chief porter to organize transport of all the supplies. Although the public parts of the festival in Dolakha begin only on Dasami, all of these participants must begin making preparations at home two weeks before the festival.

The nari begin their annual possession on the new moon two weeks before Dasami, when they begin shaking at least twice a day, in the morning and evening, indicating that the goddess is beginning to possess them. During this period, the nari must be attentively cared for by their families, since if the shaking begins while they are doing physical labor they can injure themselves, or if when eating they may choke. One family member is usually assigned as an attendant to each nari, and this person will spend most of the next few weeks looking after him. Often the attendant is a son or other close young male relative, and this is also an opportunity for him to learn about the nari's role and anticipate himself in it someday.

On Astami, the eighth day of Dasain, the nari and their attendants begin preparing for a ritual that will start at sundown and last all night long at the house of the oldest nari. Sukhbir, who currently occupies this position, is 75 years old and has been acting as a nari for forty years, since he was 35. Although the evening ritual takes place in his house, the officiants are Dumkot's Thangmi gurus, not Sukhbir himself or the other nari. The purpose of the ritual is to propitiate all territorial and tutelary Thangmi deities, make offerings to them, and request their guidance and help in making the following several days of high-profile ritual participation in Dolakha successful. Most importantly, the local deities—Sundrawati, Gatte, and Biswakarma—are asked to provide security to the nari when they are possessed by the goddess so that they are able to accomplish their tasks for her without making any inauspicious moves. After the deities are propitiated, fortunes are told for the nari, and finally, as day breaks, a chicken is sacrificed to each deity. The chants used to propitiate the deities on this occasion conform to a standard rhetorical model common to other Thangmi ritual, but the specific requests made of them differ. An abbreviated version of the same ritual "text" is repeated on the following day in Dolakha, before the nari commence their blood-drinking.

Once day breaks and the household ritual is over, two more rituals remain to be conducted before the Thangmi group can begin their journey to Dolakha. The first is a set of goat



sacrifices at the Dumkot Bhimsen temple, and the second is a chicken sacrifice at a cave above the village called Sada Apok.<sup>14</sup>

At the Dumkot Bhimsen temple, which local Thangmi refer to as *Dolakha Bhimsenko dai*, or “Dolakha Bhimsen’s older brother”, twelve goats must be slaughtered as a prelude to the following two days of buffalo sacrifice at the Dolakha Bhimsen. The sacrifice is carried out by two hereditary Thangmi *pujari*, or temple officiants. According to Thangmi informants, if the Dumkot Bhimsen is not satisfied first, the Dolakha sacrifices cannot be conducted. If anyone tries to preempt this order, Bhimsen will fly into a rage directed at all those who disobey him. This is because the Dumkot Bhimsen is in fact the “original” deity, from which the Dolakha Newar appropriated his image as the centrepiece of their own temple, which they now claim is the primary one. Nonetheless, the Thangmi remain devoted to their own Bhimsen temple in Dumkot. The Thangmi party which travels to Dolakha to perform at Devikot–Khadga Jatra must bear evidence of the completed sacrifices at Dumkot Bhimsen, or else the Dolakha sacrifices cannot begin. They carry a piece of the sacrificial animal’s intestine to demonstrate that the ritual has indeed taken place.

The Dumkot Bhimsen sacrifice is conducted simultaneously with another one at Sada Apok, which is carried out by the chief *nari*, Man Bahadur, who doubles as *pujari* at this temple. Three ritual items which represent different aspects of the deity Biswakarma are kept in a basket at this cave, each with a distinctive Thangmi name: a knife (*nyangsuri*), a sickle (*nyangkatari*) and a Nepali-style *khukuri* knife (*nyangmesa*).<sup>15</sup> These items are reputed to be ancient relics from Simraungadh, and they are only taken out of the cave once every other year on the full moon of the month of Jeth (May–June) (Miller 1997[1979]: 118). On Nawami, the ninth day of Dasain, they are simply worshipped without viewing, and a chicken is sacrificed in the deity’s honor. To the Dumkot Thangmi gathered at the cave, these relics are strong symbols of ethnic identity and history, and honoring them before making the trek to Dolakha to participate in the inter-ethnic ritual of Devikot–Khadga Jatra provides a sense

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<sup>14</sup> In Thangmi, *apok* means ‘cave’, while *sada* is most likely a Nepali loan word meaning ‘sacrificial’.

<sup>15</sup> According to Dumkot guru Ram Bahadur Thami, the prefix *nyang-* marks each of these terms as Thangmi ritual lexicon. The vernacular terms for these objects are the same as the ritual language terms but without the prefix, although *nyangkatari* inverts the final two consonants in the colloquial Thangmi word for sickle, *karati*. In vernacular Thangmi *mesa* means ‘buffalo’, and according to the same guru the knife known as *nyangmesa* in ritual Thangmi may in fact refer to an animal deity.

of solidarity and confidence in the powers of Thangmi consciousness, even in the presence of dominant others.

Here we have another apparent exception to the rule about Thangmi identity serving as its own sacred object due to the lack of material objects to serve that purpose, as described in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. However, like the wooden dagger and the drum described there, the objects kept in this cave are generic implements in hill Nepal, which have no particularly sacred, or particularly Thangmi, meaning except by virtue of their special names in ritual language. They become sacred only in the presence of Thangmi guru and the recitation of their *paloke*. In addition, most Thangmi did not know about these objects and their power; only the nari and their close associates in Dumkot were familiar with them. Other Thangmi knew only about the nari and the ritual act they performed in Dolakha; in this sense any sacred power that these objects might have held was transferred to the nari before their departure for Dolakha, and it was the nari themselves who came to embody the originary power of Thangmi identity and serve as its living sign.

#### *Devikot Jatra*

Once these rituals have been completed in Dumkot, the nari and their supporting group of about twenty people make the four-hour trek to Dolakha on the afternoon of Nawami, carrying all of the supplies they will need for their three to four day stay there. Immediately upon arrival, they begin building the Dasain ghar, a small thatched-roof shelter in the corner of a courtyard belonging to a wealthy Newar family who provide financial support for the Thangmi ritual work.<sup>16</sup> Early the next morning, the two nari who will perform this year prepare themselves for

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<sup>16</sup> See the section on economic issues below for more details.

the task at hand. They strip down to nothing but loincloths, and begin to shake slightly as the goddess controls them. The guru begin propitiating the Thangmi deities, as described above [see Figure 8.1]. They shake increasingly violently, and after several minutes the guru go into trance. The entire group then begins their procession from the Dasain ghar to the Bhimsen temple, where the nari briskly wash themselves. They proceed quickly downhill to Devikot, followed by a few hundred onlookers of all ethnic groups and ages. The nari enter the Devikot temple, the inner sanctum of which contains a representation of the goddess, which no one except the Devikot priest himself may see.<sup>17</sup> After offering themselves to the goddess, the nari are anointed with oil and daubed with red powder all over their bodies by the Devikot priest [Figure 8.2] As they reemerge outside, they begin shaking more forcefully, crouching with their backs to the temple, so that the goddess may ride them.

A male buffalo calf is brought into the temple courtyard, and as a large crowd looks on, a Kasai (Newar butcher caste) man cuts the main artery in its neck. The nari lean forward as they crouch with their backs towards the temple, and thrice drink the squirting blood of the dying buffalo, rinsing their mouths out with water in between. They remain in trance the entire time, and the excess blood is drained into clay pots.

After drinking the blood, the nari and their entourage leave the Devikot courtyard quickly and proceed towards Rajkuleswar, a small shrine at the eastern edge of the town, followed again by hundreds of onlookers. At Rajkuleswar, the nari must swallow flaming wicks, and then beat another buffalo tethered in the courtyard three times.<sup>18</sup> Afterwards, this buffalo is also slaughtered. Both its head and that of the buffalo calf sacrificed earlier at Devikot will resurface during Khadga Jatra on the following day. At this point, the nari have completed their responsibilities for the day, and they are finally able to bathe and wash off the blood covering their bodies. The assistants who have been with the nari all day shake them to bring them out of trance. Finally the entire group returns to the Dasain ghar to rest

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<sup>17</sup> The current head priest, Man Kaji Shrestha, was 73 years old in 2004 and had been serving in this position since 2053 VS. There are two other assistant priests who work under him, also from the Shrestha caste.

<sup>18</sup> Thangmi and Newar interpretations of this ritual element differ. The nari and their attendants say that eating the burning wick brings the nari out of trance. This is consistent with broader Thangmi practice: in every shamanic ritual, burning wicks are fed to those in trance in order to return them from the invisible to the visible world. A newsletter published by a Dolakha Newar cultural organization claims instead that, “burning lamps are inserted in their [the naris’] mouths as a symbol of Thami power”.

and eat again, since they have been fasting since they left their home in Dumkot a few days before.



Figure 8.1 Thangmi gurus from Dumkot propitiating deities at Devikot Jatra, Dolakha Bazaar, October 2004



Figure 8.2 Naris anointed with red powder to mark them as demons, shortly before drinking blood at Devikot Jatra, October 2004

### *Khadga Jatra*

The ritual cycle continues on the following day with Khadga Jatra, which commemorates the victory of Tripura-Sundari's son, Bhairav, over the demon Mahisasura. The Thangmi group spends the morning in the Dasain ghar, with the guru chanting the standard propitiation of deities, as on the previous two days. As the morning progresses, the guru become increasingly animated. The Khadga Jatra festivities begin around mid-day, with music wafting up from the procession of nine Newar dancers making its way through the bazaar. The dancers are all men, one from each of nine Shrestha families who participate in the ritual every year. Onlookers touch the khadga ceremonial swords to bring good luck for the coming year. In the Dasain ghar, the nari begin shaking at the knees. Big white flags on long wooden poles are carried past. These precede the procession of dancers to herald the coming of the gods.

By mid-afternoon, the first group of Newar dancers finally approaches the Thangmi. Six dancers in white carry offerings. The guru and nari are both shaking in earnest. The first group of Newar dancers pass by the Dasain ghar, and wait on the main path. A second group of three dancers approaches, followed by a third group of three, and these six stand together. The dancers finally enter the small courtyard where the Thangmi participants are waiting, and salute the Thangmi with their swords. Then, as on the day before, the united group heads off together, behind the Bhimsen temple and down the hill. The Thangmi lead the way, far ahead of the Newar dancers, who stop to dance in front of crowds at every intersection.

The entire group enters the courtyard of Tripura-Sundari, after circumambulating the building clockwise. The Thangmi immediately ascend the steps to enter the temple, with the guru and nari making offerings to the goddess inside the Devikot shrine. After about half an hour the first group of Newar dancers arrive. They go inside to make offerings, and the Thangmi participants come and sit outside on the entrance steps while the dancers look on from the windows above.

After another quarter of an hour or so, the senior group of dancers finally arrive. This includes the *dharmaraja*, or religious king, who leads the divine army forward to vanquish the demons. They dance outside the temple for some time, and then go inside. Shortly thereafter, the two Thangmi charged with carrying the heads from the buffaloes sacrificed the previous day during Devikot Jatra emerge. The slain heads are perched on

these two men's shoulders [see Figure 8.3]. The senior *tauke*, or head-carrier, is Gopilal, a prominent social figure in his sixties who was one of the first Thangmi to become involved with national politics, through the Nepali Congress party. He remains an important local political activist and this role does not appear to be contradictory to his ritual one; since he believes strongly that continued Thangmi participation in Devikot–Khadga Jatra is essential to maintaining a unique Thangmi identity within a modern Nepal. The younger head carrier is Sanuman, in his forties, and both he and Gopilal belong to the *roimirati* clan. During one of the years I observed the ritual, Sanuman was on crutches and required help from his wife and son to carry his bloody load. When I asked why someone else couldn't take his place, I was told that the hereditary nature of this responsibility dictates that the current *tauke* must play the role until he dies. No exceptions are granted, even for temporary or permanent disabilities.



Figure 8.3 Sanuman and Gopilal carrying the heads of sacrificed bufflaos at Khadga Jatra, Dolakha Bazaar, October 2004

Finally, the two *tauke* come down the main steps and exit the compound, waiting on a small plateau just below. Then the Newar dancers begin to stream out of the temple. The *dharmaraja*, usually portrayed by an older Newar man, is the last to emerge. He wears the intestines of that day's sacrificed buffalo, linked in a long, necklace-like chain, as proof of his successful conquest of the demons. The intestines jiggle as he

dances in a wild trance. He requires an assistant on either side to support him, since he seems unable to control himself.

As soon as the *dharmaraja* makes it all the way down the steps and out of the compound to where the Thangmi head-carriers are waiting, the procession starts again. The head-carriers lead, and the procession makes its way slowly through the whole town, stopping at each intersection to sing of vanquishing the demons. Finally, the whole entourage ends up at Rajkuleswar temple at the opposite end of town from Devikot. At Rajkuleswar, the demons are banished for the final time when the head-carrying Thangmi cut off the tails of the dead buffaloes lying there, and stuff the tails in the mouths of the severed heads. The whole festival concludes after the dancers chant verses to scare the demons into dispersing. The heads are then ritually useless and are dragged along the ground carelessly instead of carried proudly on shoulders. The heads are returned to Devikot, where they will be chopped up into small pieces and given as a ritual offering to the Newar participants.

Upon reaching Devikot again, two *kubindho* (N), large pumpkins, are hacked apart.<sup>19</sup> There is a scramble to get a piece of the pumpkin, the meat of which is believed to make infertile cows and other livestock fertile again. The pumpkin pieces retain their power for twelve years, so people take home whatever pieces they can grab, dry them in the sun, and use them little by little as necessary. With this last substitute sacrifice complete, the ritual concludes for the year. The Thangmi participants prepare to return to Dumkot that night.

### *Economic Issues*

The history of the *guthi* (N < Newar), or lands granted to the temples which were used to support the rituals carried out at the Devikot and Bhimsen temples, provides a valuable window through which to view the relationships between the Thangmi, Newar and Bahun-Chhetri communities in Dolakha. Documents dating to 1850 VS (1793–1794 AD) show that Rana Bahadur Shah endowed *guthi* lands to the Dolakha Bhimsen temple at that time (Regmi 1981: 14). It is possible that a separate *guthi* was endowed for the Devikot temple at a similar time, but there are no available documents to date the Devikot *guthi* precisely.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Chalier-Visuvalingam also describes a pumpkin sacrifice in Nuwakot, where she claims the gourds stand in for human heads (1989: 169).

<sup>20</sup> Miller claims that there was a single *guthi* which supported both the Devikot and Bhimsen temples (1997[1979]: 88). Although their management may have been linked, several informants have confirmed that there were indeed two separate tracts



In any case, Thangmi informants claim that the Devikot *guthi* included 268 muri of land. According to the nari and their families, this was adequate to support the Thangmi participation in the ritual by providing food and grain alcohol during their stay in Dolakha, as well as a small additional “payment” of surplus grain.

However, problems arose in the management of the *guthi* in the mid-twentieth century, and both temple *guthi* were finally abolished in the early 1990s during a central government effort to measure and reallocate such lands all over Nepal. Miller suggests that difficulties over Thangmi access to the *guthi* lands may have begun as early as 1905 AD (1997[1979]: 89), but escalated severely in 2005 VS (1948–1949 AD). This matches with reports from Dumkot Thangmi informants, such as the senior nari Sukhbir, who claims that his father led a protest against the abuse of *guthi* lands towards the end of his life term as a nari. Since Sukhbir took over the role upon his father’s death in 2021 VS (1963–1964 AD), it is likely that his father’s protest actions took place in the 1950s.

The assertion that conflict over *guthi* lands escalated in 1948 dates it to the same year in which the Suspa *mizar*, Sure, set about Hinduizing Thangmi wedding traditions in response to concern expressed by representatives of the central government, as described in Chapter 7. The fact that this occurred in the same year as conflict over access to the *guthi* began escalating suggests that the Nepali state substantially increased its presence in Dolakha and its engagement with the Thangmi at this time.<sup>21</sup>

In any case, both Newar and Thangmi narratives concur that at some point in the last century, the Thangmi participants in Devikot–Khadga Jatra began to have difficulties accessing the *guthi* lands for harvest because Bahun–Chhetri families newly established in the area refused to respect the *guthi* charter and claimed those lands as their own. According to Miller, these high

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of land.

<sup>21</sup> Comprehensive historical research on local conditions in the late 1940s would help contextualize the isolated incidents that I have been able to describe here.



caste settlers “took the step of preventing the Thamis from getting the harvest from this land” (1997[1979]: 90). The Newar priests at Devikot did not know what had happened until the Thangmi failed to arrive on Nawami in time for Devikot Jatra. A concerned delegation from Dolakha trekked to Dumkot to inquire, and there learned that since the nari and their families had been unable to access the *guthi* lands, they did not have food supplies for their stay in Dolakha and had therefore decided to stay home. Miller suggests that the Newar priest interceded and negotiated on behalf of the Thangmi with the Bahun–Chhetri who were blocking access to the *guthi* lands, and that the problem did not recur in the future (1997[1979]: 91).

At the time Miller visited Dolakha in 1974–1975, it appears that the *guthi* was still functional, since he writes of the Thangmi entourage being fed several large meals from *guthi* proceeds during the festivals he observed. However, Thangmi participants complained to him about the miserly nature of the meals and suggested that they were unhappy with the arrangement.

By the time I began research in 1999, the *guthi* was no more, and a new system had been improvised to take its place. During the nine months in 1994–1995 when the Communist Party of Nepal (UML) formed a majority government in Kathmandu, they had implemented a policy of abolishing certain *guthi* lands across the country. Their rationale was that many temple organizations were becoming wealthy on income derived from the surplus harvest from their large tracts of *guthi* land, which should be made available to common citizens as public land instead. In the Dolakha case, the irony was that the *guthi* had in fact been used to provide for a disadvantaged segment of society—the Thangmi of Dumkot—in exchange for their ritual services.

When the *guthi* disappeared, Laxman Shrestha, a wealthy Dolakha businessman, took it upon himself to provide some support for the Thangmi ritual participants. Shrestha’s forefathers had been involved in managing the Bhimsen *guthi*, and he felt a sense of personal responsibility for ensuring that the Thangmi would continue to participate in Devikot–Khadga Jatra. In 2051 VS (1994–1995 AD), he established a 50,000 rupee bank fund for the nari. Since then, he has distributed the annual interest from this investment among the Thangmi ritual participants and their attendants, which amounts to 5000–8000 rupees per year for the entire Thangmi group, depending upon national economic conditions and interest rates. At most, when

divided among the approximately twenty-strong Thangmi group, this leaves 200–400 rupees per person, out of which they must pay for all of their food and supplies for their three to four day stay in Dolakha. Although the nari, *tauke* and other Thangmi participants are generally grateful to Laxman Shrestha and see him as a thoughtful benefactor, they still complain that the amount they receive is not adequate compensation for their efforts.

## Analysis

### *The Power of Impurity*

So why do the Thangmi keep participating? The answer lies in an understanding of ambivalent agency, which explains the apparent conundrum of devoted Thangmi performance in a ritual that seems to take place entirely outside the world of Thangmi social relations, without any visible social benefit for them, and which is degrading to their social status in the eyes of most observers.

Miller's explanation for ongoing Thangmi participation in these rituals is that the nari are compelled to perform their role not by the Newar ritual officiants, whom it appears they are serving, but in fact directly by the goddess Tripura-Sundari, often called Maharani, herself. Such an explanation fits nicely within the paradigm for "multiple structures of meaning as engendered by different readings of ritual performance by different social groups" outlined by Ohnuki-Tierney (1987: 5) in general, and articulated in the Nepal-specific context by Holmberg (2000) and Pfaff-Czarnecka (1996), as discussed above.

In the Hindu story of Bhagawati and Raktabir, which they are going to see re-enacted now, the Newar spectators have a symbol of moral righteousness triumphing over irrational evil; but the non-Hindu tribal Thamias viewing and participating in the scene today contemplate rather an invisible power becoming visible in their midst and satisfying through them its desire for blood-offerings. They call it "Maharani" and no attempt is made to rationalize her appetite for blood; she has chosen the *nari* for this purpose because she wants it so. Because of this double view of the ceremony, and the double view of the world and reality which it implies, there is a doubling of religious specialists here as well. (Miller 1997[1979]: 77)

Indeed, in the Dolakha Newar world view, the Thangmi play the undesirable role of demons—by-association: having drunk the demon’s blood, represented by the blood of the buffalo calf, they themselves become demons incarnate. As the *nari* exit the Devikot grounds after drinking the blood, shouts of *rakshas*—demon—ring out from Newar onlookers jeering at the Thangmi. But for the Thangmi themselves, participation in the ritual is an important form of mediation between the human and the divine. As Miller puts it, “it is a case of the invisible becoming visible in the Thami *nari* and their *jankri* gurus” (1997[1979]: 73).

A Japanese comparison provides further insight into the power dynamics at work in the Devikot–Khadga Jatra situation. To some extent, the Dolakha scenario is structurally similar to the one Ohnuki–Tierney describes for a Japanese monkey ritual: “... the monkey and the special status people have always been assigned the role of keeping the Japanese pure; they did so as mediators by bringing in the pure and creative power of the deities, and they do so as scapegoats by shouldering the impurity of the dominant Japanese” (1987: 151). Like their Japanese counterparts, the Thangmi serve both as mediators between the seen and unseen worlds—an important trope in the Himalayan ritual world just as it is in Japan—and as scapegoats for ritual impurity.

Ohnuki–Tierney claims that despite their social marginality, the “special status people” who performed the monkey ritual were marginal without being “negative in valuation” (1987: 86). In fact, she suggests that elite members of the outcaste groups were often in close literal and metaphorical proximity to centres of sociopolitical power. She therefore argues that impurity in itself is not always a negative value. Instead, in many cultural contexts, “specialists in impurity”, in the Dumontian sense, are an absolute social necessity, and carry with them an unexpectedly positive status (Ohnuki–Tierney 1987: 89–91). This inversion also recalls Declan Quigley’s argument about the “impure priest”, in which the priestly activities of *brahmans*—who are usually portrayed as the highest Hindu caste—in fact mark them as a particular kind of untouchable (1993: 81). By the same token, Miller reports that the Dolakha Newar he initially interviewed about the Thangmi blood drinkers described the *nari* as “like Brahmins” (1997[1979]: 65).<sup>22</sup> Within this framework, we can begin to

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<sup>22</sup> Thangmi participants themselves do not necessarily see being “like Brahmins” as a

understand how Thangmi marginality and impurity, as asserted in their ritual role, is not necessarily “negative in valuation”, but may instead afford the Thangmi a modicum of sociopolitical power vis-à-vis the Dolakha Newar.

Ohnuki-Tierney’s “special status people” attain power only through their proximity to its centre, not by asserting it on their own terms. This formulation is rather similar to Guha’s “ritual inversion” argument (1983), since in both contexts the power attained remains subject to the terms of domination. As outlined earlier, such a framework is not entirely adequate to address the Thangmi situation. There is an important difference between the Japanese monkey ritual and the Devikot-Khadga Jatra situations. In the former, the “special status people” perform the monkey ritual as a means of gaining power within the dominant system and see themselves as subordinated in a dualistic relationship with those who dominate them; whereas in the latter, the Thangmi mediation between the seen and unseen worlds is effected primarily for indigenous Thangmi soteriological purposes, according to the terms of Thangmi consciousness, rather than to satisfy Newar requirements.

#### *Ritual Reiteration*

This is not to suggest that the Thangmi participants remain unaware of the pragmatic social power gained through serving as specialists in impurity for the Newar. In fact, the nari themselves, as well as many members of the broader Thangmi community are very conscious of this aspect of their performance and speak about it frequently in a variety of contexts. However, the social power gained in relation to the Newar community is seen as an added bonus resulting from the ritual, rather than its primary aim. For this reason, Miller’s assertion that a dualistic “double view” of the world governs Thangmi and Newar participation in Devikot-Khadga Jatra is too simplistic, although on the right track. I would revise Miller’s interpretation by suggesting that the Thangmi are fully conscious of both views, not just their own. Both structures of meaning operate simultaneously and are dependent upon each other, so accepting one inherently entails accepting the other. Like the Tamang described by Holmberg and Pfaff-Czarnecka,

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positive attribute, since they have had largely negative experiences with members of that caste group, and associate Brahmins with exploitation and dishonesty. However, what is important here is that Miller’s Dolakha Newar informants recognized the Thangmi nari as ritual specialists carrying out sacred duties, not just demons to be derided.

the Thangmi nari and their extended communities recognize the terms of their domination, but in a manner that does not necessarily result in a resistance structured by those same terms, as Ohnuki-Tierney or Guha would have us believe. Instead, the Thangmi participation in Devikot-Khadga Jatra results in an ambivalent agency, which appropriates power from the source of domination, but in the process of its restructuring according to indigenous terms, effects a shift in consciousness from that of subordination to that of positive identity construction.

Butler articulates this type of dynamic by posing a set of questions:

A significant and potentially enabling reversal occurs when power shifts from its status as a condition of agency to the subject's 'own' agency ... How are we to assess that becoming? Is it an enabling break, a bad break? How is it that the power upon which the subject depends for existence and which the subject is compelled to reiterate turns against itself in the course of that reiteration? How might we think resistance within the terms of reiteration? (Butler 1997b: 12)

Devikot-Khadga Jatra is a clear ethnographic example of a situation in which the power "which the subject is compelled to reiterate turns against itself in the course of that reiteration" (Butler 1997b: 12). As a calendrical ritual, Devikot-Khadga Jatra is annually reiterated, providing within itself the constant promise of resistance. The ritual framework in which the Thangmi perform is indeed structured by the dominant Newar need for socio-religious scapegoats, but the power which the Thangmi generate through their ritual performance rejects and in fact alters the terms of domination by appropriating it as a fundamental aspect of Thangmi identity itself. The power accrued by individual Thangmi nari through the ritual performance takes on a life of its own beyond the ritual, becoming a foundation for identity construction within the realm of Thangmi social relations. Yet this appropriation of ritual power is not detached from an awareness of the source of that power, as Miller's "double view" formulation would suggest. Instead, by acknowledging that ritual power is an important source of Thangmi agency, Thangmi identity at once reiterates and resists it.

### *Individual and Collective Consciousness*

Understanding how Thangmi ambivalent agency works requires one more turn, which is to examine more closely the individual identities of the Thangmi participating in the ritual, and how are they chosen. These men embody the link between the ritual power of Devikot–Khadga Jatra and everyday Thangmi ethnic identity. The nari positions are semi-hereditary and held for a lifetime, with a new nari chosen by the goddess among the immediate male family members of a recently deceased nari. Within the Thangmi community, it is considered an honor to be chosen by the goddess, although on a practical level it is obviously a burden as well. It is important to note that nari are not equivalent to guru: the nari perform no other shamanic functions for their community. They are only expected to go into trance once a year during Devikot–Khadga Jatra, in order to carry out their clearly delimited ritual role. After these annual responsibilities are over, they return to lay life as farmers and laborers, without any expectation that they will take on further ritual duties or maintain special abilities to communicate with the divine world. Although the nari are well aware of these limitations at the internal level of consciousness, the external image of them as demons sticks. Dolakha Newar individuals often refer to members of the Thangmi ethnic group as “demons” in casual conversations, long after the rituals have been completed for that year.

The sharp distinction between Thangmi guru and nari limits the ritual pollution accrued in the performance by limiting it to two common individuals. In contrast to the Thangmi guru, these men are otherwise uninvolved with the maintenance of collective Thangmi identity through ritual. Distinguishing the powers of the nari during Devikot–Khadga Jatra from other modes of Thangmi–internal shamanic power highlights the importance of the power appropriated through the Devikot–Khadga Jatra performance for constructing Thangmi identity within the broader sociopolitical world. The fact that the nari are common people makes it much easier for a broad range of Thangmi individuals to appropriate the power these men embody during Devikot–Khadga Jatra as part of their own process of identity construction at the psychological level, since Thangmi gurus are already set apart from lay people by their access to the unseen world of deities. In this sense, the nari allow their individual consciousness—and pride—to be effaced in their performance as demons in order to produce a collective

Thangmi consciousness through that act. At the same time, their individual sense of self is formed within the collective framework of power and identity that their actions as nari, as well as the actions of those who came before them in this role, create. ...

### **Conclusion: The Threat of Refusal**

Unlike the Tamang in Pfaff-Czarnecka's case, for whom boycotting Dasain constitutes resistance on a political level, for the Thangmi to refuse participation in Devikot-Khadga Jatra would be to undermine the very basis of Thangmi identity on a psychological level. But it is unclear that the Thangmi choice to continue participating is any less an act of resistance than the Tamang boycott. Rather than situating themselves in opposition to the ritual by boycotting it, the Thangmi are committed to reiterating it in order to continue appropriating the ritual's power for their own purposes, thereby transforming its terms in the process.

At the same time, there are certainly symbolic plays on the theme of refusal, which provide opportunities for the Thangmi to clearly assert their power in a manner comprehensible to their Dolakha Newar neighbors. The Newar festival cannot proceed without the involvement of the Thangmi, so at a fundamental level the Thangmi participants have control over the ritual's efficacy. Threatening refusal is an obvious way for the Thangmi to refigure the ritual on their terms and claim power in relation to the socio-economically dominant Newar. For this reason, the threat of refusal itself has become embedded as part of the performance. As described above, Miller relates an apocryphal tale about a year in which the Thangmi refused to come to Dolakha because of a land dispute that affected their compensation for ritual duties (1997[1979]: 89–91). When the Thangmi failed to appear, the goddess possessed the entire Dolakha Newar population instead and drove them all the way to Dumkot. They found the nari shaking wildly under the goddess's influence, and although the broader Thangmi community urged them to stay away from Dolakha for political reasons, the nari could not refuse the goddess and so followed the Newar contingent back to Dolakha of their own accord.

This is only one of many possible forms the threat of refusal may take. According to Thangmi informants and my own observations, every year there is some conflict or other which causes the Thangmi group to threaten that they will not return the following year. The Newar are always duly frightened, and so give in to the Thangmi demands. In 1999, the lunar calendar

inserted an extra day between Navami (ninth day of Dasain) and Dasami (tenth day of Dasain), of which the Thangmi were not aware. So the Thangmi group arrived in Dolakha one day early, and the Devikot priests asked them to wait an additional day to perform the ritual. The Thangmi refused, since the nari must fast from the moment they leave their homes, and they did not want to go hungry for an additional day. They repeatedly threatened to leave Dolakha, forfeiting their ritual role, and several times began walking back up the path towards Dumkot. The Newar priests called them back each time, and eventually gave in, agreeing to hold the entire ritual a day ahead of schedule. Dolakha Newar onlookers were very upset about this turn of events, as the Thangmi refusal required them to perform the ritual on an inauspicious and calendrically incorrect day. But they knew they had no choice, and the ritual proceeded with a fraction of the usual crowds in attendance.

In 2004, a dispute took place inside the Devikot temple, shortly before the sacrifice was to be made. The Devikot priests are supposed to anoint the nari with *sindur* (N), a dry red powder used in Hindu rituals, all over their bodies in order to mark them as demons. This year, the priests were apparently in a rush and had not purchased a new stock of sindur. With only a little bit of the red powder at their disposal, they painted a few barely visible marks on the nari and then tried to push them outside to get on with the blood-drinking. The attendants to the nari became very angry with the priests for doing this in such a half-hearted manner, and shouted that it was unfair to the nari if they were not properly marked as demons, for if they went through the ritual without first being transformed they would be tainted with impurity in their daily lives rather than simply during the clearly demarcated ritual context. Demanding that the Newar priests procure additional sindur to complete the job properly, the Thangmi group threatened to leave without completing the ritual. The priests shoved the nari roughly, shouting that they didn't understand the problem, but the nari held their ground. Finally it became clear that they would not exit the temple in order to drink the sacrificial blood outside unless the priests complied, and several minutes later a new packet of sindur was delivered and the ritual continued.

These examples demonstrate how the annual threat of refusal asserts Thangmi power, unsettling the Newar assumption of dominance which remains unquestioned for the rest of the year. However, the Thangmi have never followed through on the threat. In the end, they always participate, for the threat of



refusal is not nearly as powerful as the performance of the ritual itself. The performance itself constitutes Thangmi agency, while the threat of refusal which always precedes it lays bare the ambivalence at its core.

In conclusion, I turn to a final quotation from Butler which lucidly articulates this paradox:

Agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled. One might say that the purposes of power are not always the purposes of agency. To the extent that the latter diverge from the former, agency is the assumption of a purpose *unintended* by power, one that could not have been derived logically or historically, that operates in a relation of contingency and reversal to the power that makes it possible, to which it nevertheless belongs. This is, as it were, the ambivalent scene of agency, constrained by no teleological necessity. (Butler 1997b: 15)

In their yearly ritual performance, then, the nari reiterate an indigenous, collective Thangmi agency. Although always ambivalent, this agency is in part an unintended consequence of attempted domination by the Dolakha Newar, caste Hindus, and the Nepali state. The ritual relationships embedded in Devikot–Khadga Jatra shape the expression of Thangmi agency and identity, and by appropriating the power generated through these relationships for their own purposes, Thangmi participation transcends the structure of domination.

### *A Sign of the Times*

In 2006, the Thangmi called their own ritual bluff. My assertion that the threat of refusal was not nearly as powerful as the reiterative performance of the ritual itself was off the mark. Or to be more generous, it described an earlier paradigm that no longer applied by 2006, and had probably already begun weakening several years earlier. I was too close to notice, and also too invested in the “teleological necessity” of interpretive certainty that my work entailed, thereby

curtailing its real potential for agency. Could I have seen it coming? Perhaps, if I had read the tension between Newar and Thangmi which seemed to increase year by year as a sign of these particular times, instead of as a timeless structural feature of the ritual itself.

What actually happened in 2006 to finally transform the threat of refusal into a real refusal? Captioning a photo of the Newar dancers at Khadga Jatra, the Kathmandu Post suggested that, “Due to a protest from the Maoists, the tradition of drinking a water buffalo’s blood and carrying its head was cancelled this year” (TKP October 5, 2006: 1; see figure 8.4).<sup>23</sup> Unsurprisingly, this explanation came from none other than the journalist Rajendra Manandhar, who was infamous among the



Figure 8.4 *The Kathmandu Post* photo and report about the end of Thangmi participation in Devikot–Khadga Jatra, October 2006

<sup>23</sup> The caption misrecognizes the Newar dancers as Thangmi: “People from the Thami community armed with traditional weaponry take out the Khadga Jatra procession, a centuries-old tradition”.

Thangmi for his article claiming that they were the descendants of yeti (as described in Chapter 1), and did not tell the whole story from the Thangmi perspective.

I knew that the Maoists had in fact been calling for the cancellation of Devikot–Khadga Jatra for several years now—they had been active in the area since the late 1990s, and did not like ostentatious displays of power put on by anyone but themselves.<sup>24</sup> However, these demands had been oriented towards the public festival as a whole, and applied to all participants, not just Thangmi, and to all ritual elements, not just the act of blood–drinking. In any case, the Newar organizers of the event had always refused to comply. Many Dolakha Newar were middle–class members of civil society—teachers, hospital administrators, shopkeepers—whose goodwill the Maoists in large part depended upon, and perhaps this emboldened them to ignore the Maoist calls to cancel their public Dasain rituals. In any case, it seemed unlikely that a Maoist threat which had gone unheeded for several years would suddenly bring about such a dramatic change of heart.

As I arrived in Dolakha some weeks after the ritual would have taken place, I ran into Ram Bahadur on the road. He was the youngest of the Dumkot gurus at 30. He was literate but also deeply committed to his practice as a guru, and I had heard him speak against

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<sup>24</sup> See Shneiderman (2003) and Shneiderman and Turin (2004) for more details of the Maoist presence in the area.

scripturalization of the *paloke* at a recent NTS meeting. I asked him whether the naris and the rest of the Dumkot community were upset about the Maoist decree. “You believed that too?” he laughed. I didn’t understand, and asked him to explain further.

We held a meeting in Dumkot and decided that it was finally time to stop going. See, the *guthi* doesn’t provide enough for us, I think you know that, and it was getting harder and harder to go. The naris said they could do their shaking [go into trance] at home. Sukhbir [the senior nari], he is so old now that he can barely walk to Dolakha, why should he suffer? Before, we always thought about not going, but we were worried that the Newar would make our lives difficult, we needed them. Now, we don’t need them so much anymore, it’s only they who need us. They were so embarrassed and angry when we didn’t come that they told everyone it was because of the Maoists. It’s true that the Maoists had been asking us not to do it for a long time, but that is not why we stopped.

Could it really be true, that just like that, the naris had decided they didn’t need to go anymore? If so, then it was a tremendously agentive act, and as such a demonstration of power, yet one that canceled out the power that they had previously achieved through participation in the ritual. What was qualitatively different about this new form of power, and did other Thangmi relate to it as representative of their own identity in the same way they had to the ritual act itself? Ram Bahadur had explained the end of the ritual in a very matter-of-fact manner, which put my own initial dismay at hearing about the end of the ritual in perspective. If the naris were in fact not only happy with this outcome, but had made the decision for it themselves, then I certainly had no place being upset.

Gopilal, a senior figure of Thangmi society in his 60s who had been one of the head-carriers in Khadga Jatra and was also a long time Nepali Congress activist, helped me understand more clearly what had happened. I asked him why they felt that they didn't "need the Newar so much anymore", as Ram Bahadur had put it.

After the People's Movement last spring [April 2006], everyone felt different. We saw that the King could no longer stop what the people wanted. It's time for the old rulers to go and for people's democracy to take their place. For us, the Newar were like the King is for the whole country, and just like that their rule is also finished.

Gopilal's statement pointed back to Dasain's history as a ritual of state power, which, as described above, worked to legitimate nested levels of ruling power from the Shah kings at the top, down to the rulers of individual principalities at the local level throughout Nepal, like the Newar of Dolakha. Gopilal seemed to be saying that the old frameworks within which power was asserted had dissolved in the wake of the 2006 People's Movement, which brought the end of the Nepal's ruling Shah dynasty into sight.<sup>25</sup> At an ideological level, the loss of royal power also deeply unsettled the Dolakha Newar position in national hierarchies of rule, even if nothing had changed overnight in their local economic or social status. Recall Pfaff-Czarnecka's statement that, "Power rituals in complex societies pertain to specific sociopolitical orders and to the authority of those in focal political

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<sup>25</sup> Gyanendra Shah was only officially deposed in May 2008, but the People's Movement in April 2006 brought about the end of his 14 months of autocratic direct rule, and effectively stripped him of political power during the interim period while his ultimate fate was decided.

positions within these orders” (1996: 59). With the 2006 People’s Movement and the ensuing moves towards elections, a constituent assembly, and the restructuring of Nepal as a secular federal republic, the sociopolitical order of Hindu divine kingship within which Dasain had served as a power ritual at the national level had fallen away, along with the local instantiation of it in Devikot–Khadga Jatra, in which the Newar were the focal figures of authority. The political transformation that the country had experienced meant that the Dolakha Newar were no longer a local proxy for royal rule, and therefore no longer in control of the ritual power out of which the Thangmi had learned to craft their own.

#### *Uncertainty in the New Order*

The end of Devikot–Khadga Jatra was probably one of many signs across the country that the ritual idiom of state power that had defined Nepal as a nation since 1769 (Burghart 1984) was in its dying days. But what was to replace it, and how would the agentive power of Thangminess be articulated within whatever the new framework was?

For a start, let me return to the guru Ram Bahadur’s assertion that the naris could still go into trance at home. Indeed, this is apparently what has happened every year since 2006: the naris still begin shaking and go into trance on the same day that they used to, the gurus still come to sit with them and guide them through their journey to the divine world, and the naris still experience the goddess

riding them. The soteriological aspect of what used to occur at Devikot–Khadga Jatra continues, and has in fact been reframed within an exclusively Thangmi practice context that looks much like the propitiation of Bhume described in Chapter 6, or the propitiation of deities at a *mumpra* funerary rite as described in Chapter 7.<sup>26</sup> The fundamental characteristics of Thangmi originary power as articulated in practice have not changed, then, but the ways that this power is performatized for presentation to broader public audiences have.

The composition of those audiences, or, in other words, the agents from whom Thangmi seek recognition of their power, has changed along with the scale on which that power is conceptualized and the idiom in which it is expressed. Rather than seeing the localized, Newar–dominated public sphere of Dolakha as the outer limit of their power as expressed through the ritual idiom of Devikot–Khadga Jatra, Thangmi have now begun to conceptualize the national Nepali public sphere as a primary arena within which such power must be demonstrated, in the political idiom of ethnic activism, in order to secure recognition.

Perhaps contrary to expectations, active participation in the Nepali national public sphere is much newer for most Thangmi than participation in the transnational public sphere created through circular migration between Nepal and India that is described in

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<sup>26</sup> It is also worth noting here that the family–based aspects of Dasain practice, such as receiving the blessing of *tika* from one’s elders continue without notable change in the Thangmi community.

Chapters 4 and 5.<sup>27</sup> As explained in Chapter 4, in fact, the sense that one could “belong” in India in political terms from very early on, in a way that one could not belong in Nepal, was one of the primary motivating factors that compelled Thangmi to settle in India, or at least spend much of their time there. The naris themselves had, in fact, all engaged in circular migration at one point of their lives, but unlike other Thangmi, they did not feel that they had the option to settle permanently in India, since they felt compelled to return to Nepal every year in order to carry out their ritual duties. One might think that they would settle in India precisely to avoid these obligations; however, they feared the consequences that lack of participation might wreak on their extended families who remained behind in Dolakha. Most Thangmi villages had some sort of ritual obligation to the Dolakha Newar during other calendrical rituals throughout the year, although none were so dramatic as the blood-drinking of the Dumkot naris. For instance, Thangmi from Lapilang were required to provide the materials for and pull the chariot at the Machendranath festival in the spring. These responsibilities may be one explanation for why substantial numbers of Thangmi engaged in circular migration, rather than settling in India permanently. Their localized ritual obligations to the Dolakha Newar tied them to their home territory, but did not preclude participation in the political life of another country because,

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<sup>27</sup> The transnational public sphere does not necessarily encompass fully both national public spheres that it mediates between, but rather outlines a third sphere which links some aspects of each national sphere to some aspects of the other through circular migration between particular localities in each.



as shown in Chapter 5, they did not until much later consider themselves citizens of Nepal with political obligations—or desires for recognition—in that national public sphere.

These histories help pinpoint how the Thangmi communities of Nepal and India began to develop along different trajectories over time: for those who remained based in Nepal, identity was produced primarily through the power of ritual within the framework of a Hindu state, while for those who settled in India, identity was produced primarily through associational politics, or what we might call the power of association, within the framework of a secular state. Ongoing circular migration, however, bound the two groups together. As I have argued in Chapter 5, knowledge of both places has long been a hallmark of Thangminess, and here we might extend this assertion to encompass knowledge of, and appreciation for, both forms of power, even if most individuals could only easily command one, if any. Silipitik traveled to India and marveled at the power of a political speech (as described in Chapter 4); activists from India came to Devikot Jatra and marveled at the naris' bold act. However, as Silipitik himself explained, the form of civil power that he witnessed in the speech in Darjeeling had little place within the ritually legitimated sociopolitical order of the Nepali state. Circular migrants like him were aware of how such power worked in India, and quite fascinated by it, but until the order changed at the highest level in Nepal, there was little point in expressing power in those terms there.

### *Multiple Agencies*

The 2006 People's Movement did not happen overnight, rather, it was the culmination of decades of political activism dating back at least to 1950, with the civil conflict between the Maoists and state forces that began in 1996 only the most recent upheaval in recent memory.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout these decades, while young activists from Nepal (Thangmi and otherwise) traveled to India to learn about the techniques of power politics,<sup>29</sup> in Nepal the sociopolitical order and its power rituals stood fast. Thangmi became involved in party politics (largely via communism, but some, like Gopilal, were Nepali Congress members) and then ethnic activism, and slowly political power and ritual power began to articulate with each other. Activists set out to write about the Thangmi role in Devikot–Khadga Jatra<sup>30</sup> and the naris threatened refusal, but still, every year, they continued to drink blood, and Thangmi everywhere continued to tell me how important this act was in constituting their identity. The agency generated through the naris' performance was not immediately erased or overtaken by the new type of agency, rather, the former provided the foundation for the latter's

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<sup>28</sup> The People's War formally ended in November 2006, with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

<sup>29</sup> Recall that all of the major political parties in Nepal were formed in exile in India (largely in Banaras) before their members were able to return to Nepal in 1950. Many returned to India again during the most authoritarian phase of Mahendra's rule in the late 1950s

<sup>30</sup> As far as I am aware, the first Thangmi-authored publication about it is Bhaba's 1997 description of it in *Nan Ni Patuko*. In an interview, the former NTS general secretary told me how the experience of conducting research on this topic just after graduating from high school positively augmented his own sense of identity as a Thangmi after having spent the better part of his life in a boarding school.

existence. Both forms of agency were fundamentally ambivalent in the sense that they remained subject to the conditions of larger sets of power relations. Just as Nepal's king co-existed with an elected parliament for a substantial period of time, the two strategies for articulating ethnic power co-existed for several decades, as personified in the figure of Gopilal, who was one of the rare individuals with reasonable command of both. For most Thangmi, however, it would be a long time before the agency produced through political action became evident in a recognizable manner—before they recognized themselves in it, or it in themselves—in the same way that they recognized the agency produced through the naris' ritual performance.

This was one of the monumental tasks that Thangmi activists had before them as I conducted my fieldwork: figuring out how to present the sacred object of their own identity in a powerful manner that would simultaneously occasion recognition from Thangmi laypeople from a range of backgrounds, *and* from the national (Nepali and Indian) and transnational (development organizations, international indigenous rights movement) publics in relation to which they now oriented themselves. The naris' ritual act, with its double meaning, its binding of practice and performance, had accomplished this perfectly within the framework of the old sociopolitical order. The uncertainties of what the new order might be meant that no single ritual act was likely to fit the bill. Rather, activists were experimenting

with a range of ritualized performances at different times and places were being tried, such as those described in Gangtok in Chapter 2, and at Bhume Jatra described as in Chapter 6, complemented by other strategies of objectification such as writing, videoalizing, and holding public conferences. The concatenation of all of these actions, ordered within the framework of two modern nations and the transnational public sphere which linked them, were becoming the new rituals through which Thangmi engaged with the states in which they lived.

The end of Devikot–Khadga Jatra therefore did not signify the end of a fundamental, if ambivalent, aspect of Thangmi agency, as I had presumed it might when I heard the initial reports that the Maoists had forced the naris' hand. Instead, it signified the diffusion of Thangmi agency across multiple national, political, and ritual frames, enacted in a range of practices by as many individuals, who at times only ambivalently recognized the others' role in their shared project. The challenge for Thangmi now is synthesizing these forms of action in a manner which will enable them to control the terms of their own recognition, transforming the ambivalent agency of the past into a decisive one for the future. I look forward to watching and writing.

## EPILOGUE

### *Thangmi ke ho?: Processes and Objects of Identity*

“Hello, hello,” Rajen’s voice rang out across the cavernous Gorkha Duhkha Nivarak Sammelan (GDNS) auditorium in the center of Darjeeling Bazaar.<sup>1</sup> He was testing the sound system for the public program at which my husband and I were to speak about our research with the Thangmi, and show video footage from our fieldwork in Nepal. Invitations for this December 2004 event had been circulated to the entire BTWA membership, and a poster hung outside the GDNS building to advertise the event to the broader public: “First Time in Darjeeling: Thami Documentary Film Show ON BIG SCREEN”. The GDNS hall had not been renovated since it was first built in the 1930s, and rigging up a functional projection system was a major endeavor. As people began to trickle through the doors—circular migrants with their load-carrying head-straps slung over their shoulders, civil servants taking a lunch break, children sprung from school for this special occasion—I noticed a very large, cloth-draped box sitting on a table, right in the middle of the stage in a manner that blocked the screen which we had painstakingly erected. “What’s that?”, I asked nervously.

“That? That is a gift for you from the Thangmi people, an offering from us to express our appreciation for all you have done,” said Rajen, “Don’t worry, we plan to present it to you in the first part of

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<sup>1</sup> The history of GDNS is described in Chapter 5.

the program, before you show the video. It won't cause you any trouble."

My curiosity was piqued, and while the sound check continued, I couldn't help but sneak a quick look under the cloth, which upon closer inspection appeared to be layers of *kathas*—white offering scarves in the Tibetan style, printed with the BTWA *thurmi* logo and the words "Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association, established 1943, Thangmi *raksha*".<sup>2</sup> The *kathas* covered a glass box, inside of which sat a model of what I immediately recognized as a Thangmi house. Made of wood, bamboo, and clay, each tiny detail had been crafted precisely, from the thick thatched roof to the hinged doors to the small hand-mill which actually turned. A *madal* drum sat just outside the door, accompanied by a bamboo flute on which was etched the word "THAMI". Next to the box sat two certificates, recognizing our "service" to the Thangmi community, and wishing for our good health through the process of publishing the results of our work (see Figure 9.1).

I was overwhelmed by the obvious care and expense that had gone into producing this unusual gift, and wanted to understand more about its provenance. Several hours later, after we had formally received the glass-boxed Thangmi house to a standing ovation, showed our videos, and engaged in a lively public discussion with some of the over 200 Thangmi who had attended the event, I finally

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<sup>2</sup> *Raksha* (T) denotes a guru's ornaments.

had a chance to ask about the gift as we sat down at a restaurant with several BTWA officers and members.



Figure 9.1 Model Thangmi house and certificates presented to Sara Shneiderman and Mark Turin by members of the Bharatiya Thami Welfare, December 2004. (The craftsman Saroj is second from left.)

Rajen explained that they had commissioned a young Thangmi man named Saroj to make the Thangmi house. Saroj had completed a course in wood-working and made his living doing commercial artwork, but he had never crafted anything for the Thangmi community before. Rajen and his colleagues had approached Saroj about making a model of a Thangmi house after a tense meeting of the BTWA central committee, in which the officers had determined that since there was no obviously Thangmi object to gift us, they had to create one. They had first considered offering us a *thurmi*, or possibly a guru's drum, but these items would make problematic gifts. Both were passed down through gurus' lineages, becoming efficacious only in gurus' hands, and even if one could be secured, treating it as a mundane gift would

be a surefire way to raise the ire of the gurus. Instead, they needed a sacred object with secular content, so to speak—something which the BTWA activists who were organizing the event could imbue with the originary power of Thangmi identity, yet maintain control of without requiring a guru's mediation.

A Thangmi house in a box was a perfect solution. A house was something that everyone had—not particularly the domain of gurus, activists or any other particular interest group—and was at once a symbol of clan affiliation, community and territory. Most Thangmi in India did not actually live in houses that looked like the one in the box; rather, this was clearly a representation of a Thangmi house in rural Nepal. However, this fact did not seem to alienate anyone as I imagined it might. Instead, the house appeared to be a multivalent symbol which everyone could relate to, either as a literal representation of a lived experience of “home”, or as a figurative representation of a desire for such a “home”—a metaphor for a clear and recognizable identity. Thangmi from Nepal who attended the program at which the house was presented to us oohed and aahed at the glass box just as Thangmi from India did, many of whom told me proudly in the ensuing days that making the model was an important achievement for the BTWA.

Later, once we had taken the house back to Kathmandu with us (minus the glass box, which we apologetically left behind in Darjeeling out of fear it would break en route), it became a fixture of our living room and a source of endless fascination for Thangmi from rural



Dolakha and Sindhupalchok who visited us in the city. Ram Bahadur, the young guru from Dumkot who was described in Chapter 8, was particularly intrigued by it when he visited in early 2005. “Eh heh, it’s a ‘real’ Thangmi house, isn’t it?” he said (using the word ‘real’ in English). He fingered each part of the model carefully, asked where it came from, and upon hearing that it was a gift from Darjeeling, he laughed and said, “Well, if they can make this over there, they must be ‘real’ Thangmi too. I wasn’t sure about that.”

I was taken aback by this statement. What was it about the capacity to build a model of a house that one had never lived in—Saroj, the craftsman, said that he had in fact only seen photos of such houses—that could make one a “real” Thangmi? Apparently, it was the capacity to objectify something which other Thangmi could recognize as “real”—whether that be a house, a ritual practice, or in the most abstract sense, Thangminess itself.

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In the introduction to *Fluid Boundaries*, his 2001 study of the Thakali ethnic group, William Fisher suggests that the flow of the Kali Gandaki river, the dominant geographical feature of the Thakali area in central-western Nepal, serves as a useful metaphor for culture-in-process:

It was the river that gave me an analogy to use to convey my thoughts to the Thakali, a river whose peculiarities would be obvious to all of them. Thakali culture, I said in part, is like the Kali Gandaki River. It flows in a wide riverbed that allows it to break up into several meandering streams that merge again downstream. These separations and mergings vary unpredictably over time, but the separated channels always rejoin further

downstream. If you ask me which channel is the main channel, how could I answer? I could tell you which stream is the strongest one today, but I could not tell you which channel was the original or true channel of the river. The flow of the river changes from one season to the next, from one year to the next. We can describe it as we encounter it at a particular moment. Other individuals viewing the river in another year or season and comparing it to our description would recognize it to be the same river by its general location and by the general boundaries of the riverbed hemmed in by the mountains, but they would find the specifics of our description inadequate, even inaccurate. The river changes over time. Sometimes it flows peacefully and at other times with great turbulence. ... But it is nevertheless the same river.

Similarly, any description of Thakali culture is at best a representation of a moment in an ongoing cultural process. The difficulty of locating cultural coherence does not mean that Thakali culture has broken down or that it is in a transitional phase between one coherent structure or another. It merely reflects the process in which Thakali culture has been continually renewed (2001: 19–20).

I read this description early in my fieldwork, and returned to ponder it often as I struggled to understand the eddies of Thangmi culture that swirled around me. The processual view of culture that Fisher proposes matched well with my observations of Thangmi cultural life, and as outlined in the introduction to this dissertation, I defined the object of my study as the process of producing Thangminess in its totality in a cross-border context.

Despite this focus on the process of culture, I found myself repeatedly drawn to what one might contrastively call the objects of culture. As I hope I have made clear in the course of this dissertation, I do not mean objects only in the tangible sense of a tiny house in glass or a guru's *thurmi*, but also in the intangible sense in which notions

such as identity, origins, territory, and indigeneity, can be constituted as sacred objects through ritualized action. To pursue Fisher's metaphor, most of the Thangmi I met were not content just to watch the river flow, as a tourist—or a scholar—might be. Rather, at some point, they sought to engage with it as an entity in the phenomenal world: to build a bridge across it, to drink from it, to catch fish in it. In other words, many Thangmi were aware at some level that identity was produced through processual action—recall the consciousness with which different forms of objectifying action, practice and performance, were deployed (Chapter 2), or the ways in which both gurus and laypeople suggested that others should recognize Thangmi as being distinct for what they *did*, not who they were like (Chapter 3)—but this consciousness of identity-as-process did not preclude the need for identity-as-object. For Thangmi seeking recognition, whether in spiritual, political, or scholarly realms, the capacity to objectify one's relationship with the Thangmi sacred originary—in other words, the capacity for ritualized action that articulated Thangminess as a recognizable object—was what made one a 'real' Thangmi, to use the guru Ram Bahadur's words. That such ritualized action had multiple recognizable forms, from deity propitiations to political conferences, was taken for granted as part of the synthetic, collectively produced nature of Thangminess itself.

Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to demonstrate that the processes of identity production neither take place exclusively

within the boundaries of single nation-states, nor in a flat and undifferentiated world of global discourse or flow. Rather, identity is produced within multiple nation-state frames, as well as in the movement between them. Policies of recognition, as well as the schemes of classification on which they are based, and the benefits which they enable, are legally implemented within individual countries, but the effects of such legislation on ethnic subjectivities often transcends borders. Ethnicity, therefore, as the broader sets of social relations within which identities are sacralized, takes shape at the intersections of locality and transnationality, nation-state and border, village, town and city, with belonging embedded in the diverse particularities of all of these places.

The circular migration that characterizes Thangmi lives is just one of many types of cross-border movement that go on today, just as the particular set of historical, ritual, political, linguistic and other elements that shape Thangmi synthetic subjectivity is only one possible constellation among many. All of the arguments presented in this dissertation are therefore provisional, based on ethnographic work with a limited group of individuals who recognized themselves as Thangmi. I undertook the task of writing an ethnography of the Thangmi as a distinct group in part because, as described in Chapter 1, Thangmi themselves desired this, but along the way I came to understand that many of the experiences that shaped Thangmi lives were shared with others. In this sense, my ethnography of the Thangmi

may be read as a particular set of stories about a more general set of ongoing historical processes in the Himalayas and South Asia over the last half century, and particularly during the last decade during which I conducted fieldwork.

Having said that, the conclusion of my fieldwork in 2008 was by no means the end of an era in any objective sense, and it remains to be seen how the Thangmi community will be shaped by the specificities of current spatio-temporal conjunctures and their unknown futures. Most importantly, these include Nepal's political transformation from Hindu monarchy to federal democratic republic; the renewed movement for a separate state of Gorkhaland in India; the revision of citizenship and affirmative action legislation in both countries; and the ongoing deployment of the transnational categories of indigeneity, marginality and social exclusion to make localized claims for rights and funds from both states and non-governmental organizations. Within these contexts, it will be important to watch new modes of Thangmi expression in radio, print, and digital video media, which I have touched upon only briefly here. So too should we watch new sites of identity production, such as development/advocacy projects such as JANSEEP (described briefly in Chapter 6), and broader political forums such as Nepal's Constituent Assembly and Darjeeling's Gorkhaland Jana Mukti Morcha movement.

For the vast majority of Thangmi, though, life will go on in the action of the everyday, hand mills perhaps giving way to electric mills,

thatched roofs to aluminum, rickety jeeps to air-conditioned buses. If the last ten years are any indication of what is to come, new roads will be carved out of hillsides, school buildings built alongside them, and loans taken to buy farmland elsewhere. Territorial deities will continue to gather in response to the *paloke* of young gurus like Ram Bahadur, and new temples will be built in their honor, where Thangmi will come on pilgrimages of self-recognition. Thangmi will be born, married, and die, affirming their individual and communal Thangminess in the process. Houses will remain starting points for journeys across borders, as well as anchors to territory, cultural heritage sites, and a symbol in a box of all of these things. Gurus, activists, and laypeople will continue to debate the nature of originary power.

In the future, I hope that when Thangmi hear the question *Thangmi ke ho?*, some will point to this dissertation, which will be my modest contribution to their quest for sacred objects. Even if they have not seen or read it, I hope that they will know that this “book about Thangmi culture and history” (which is how many people with whom I worked referred to the anticipated result of my research) now exists. Perhaps some will answer the question *Thangmi ke ho?* in part by telling their interlocutors about the contents of these pages, understood—or imagined—as each Thangmi would like them to be.

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